



Kent Academic Repository

Szyszkó, Katarzyna (2022) *Traces (Accompanying Critical Text: A language Without Childhood Constructing new identity through translingual writing)*. Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) thesis, University of Kent,.

Downloaded from

<https://kar.kent.ac.uk/96715/> The University of Kent's Academic Repository KAR

The version of record is available from

<https://doi.org/10.22024/UniKent/01.02.96715>

This document version

UNSPECIFIED

DOI for this version

Licence for this version

UNSPECIFIED

Additional information

Versions of research works

Versions of Record

If this version is the version of record, it is the same as the published version available on the publisher's web site. Cite as the published version.

Author Accepted Manuscripts

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding. Cite as Surname, Initial. (Year) 'Title of article'. To be published in *Title of Journal*, Volume and issue numbers [peer-reviewed accepted version]. Available at: DOI or URL (Accessed: date).

Enquiries

If you have questions about this document contact ResearchSupport@kent.ac.uk. Please include the URL of the record in KAR. If you believe that your, or a third party's rights have been compromised through this document please see our [Take Down policy](https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies) (available from <https://www.kent.ac.uk/guides/kar-the-kent-academic-repository#policies>).

Traces

by

Katarzyna Szyszko

Accompanying Critical Text:

A language Without Childhood

Constructing new identity through translingual writing

Submitted in fulfilment of the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy, Practice as Research in the Contemporary Novel

School of English

University of Kent

February 2022

Word Count (novel and essay): 95245

Table of Contents:

Acknowledgments.....	3
Critical Essay: A Language without Childhood: Constructing New Identity Through Translingual Writing.....	5
Bibliography	20
Traces	22

Acknowledgments:

I want to thank my supervisor, Scarlett Thomas, the fairy godmother of this novel. Your incredible support helped me find my voice as a writer and as a person. Thank you for being there for me when I thought I wouldn't survive.

My parents, whose energy I recognise in me every day. Your wild ambitions, your fearlessness, your desire to live a million different lives. Because of many sacrifices you made and the support you gave me, I was able to fulfil my dreams.

My *Babcia*, who opened my imagination. The first writer I knew. For your unbreakable hope which, when life got really dark, reminded me that 'tomorrow will be a better day.'

Ania. You are my everything.

My grandfather. I miss you every single day.

Eleven years ago, when I thought I would never write another word, I met a man who believed otherwise. A few years later, we moved to Kent so I could start MA in Creative Writing, write my novel, and complete my PhD. Although we are no longer together, I am forever thankful for all the support and love you've given me. Thank you for believing in me always.

To Cleo and Maia who showed me what truly matters in life. For the cuddles, the warmth, the hand licks, the paws. I am so grateful and proud to be weird and call myself your cat mother.

When I went to Patmos for a Writing Retreat organised by the incredible Dan, Jenny, Weezie and Satchel (thank you!) of the GoodWorld Journeys, I had no idea it would change my life. Not only did I return home with a kitten (well, this story is much more magical and complicated than this, but let me use the short version), but I also found my tribe. Alina, Flaminia, Jeff, Karl, Sofie, Teresa, and Thaddeus - sometimes I think I exist just so I can love you. I have not known how magnificent life could be before I met you. You are magic. To Alina and Flaminia again, for reading the manuscript when I most doubted it. Your words, your feedback and your questions taught it how to walk.

To Mary Karr, you are the brightest light that shone the way for me during the darkest times. I love you and I hope I can make you proud.

To George Saunders, the reason I went to Patmos in the first place. Your compassion, humour, and wisdom were my mantras in this journey.

To my brilliant and beautiful friends, my second family. I can't believe how many wonderful people I have met in the last few years. I want to name all of you here, but then the Acknowledgments will grow longer than the novel, so here are just a few names.

To Danne, for seeing the goodness in me when I felt worthless, and for grounding me when I let my ego fly. For treating everything with equal importance, for all the rituals. I know we will always be friends.

To Sarah, with you I feel like a real writer. Thank you for making this life so special, for making everything worth celebrating, small and big, for showing me beauty in all things. For laughing to tears, for crying together. For never giving up.

To Mel, for how our friendship has changed over the last few years and how you saw who I was behind my protective glass and encouraged me to live honestly. For showing me that the true strength lies in vulnerability. And for the memes.

To Reanne, my magical friend, my soul sister. I feel like there's another dimension where we are friends from the moment we're born. Thank you for bringing joy into my life, for embracing spontaneity, wild creativity, and for holding the space for expansion and awe.

To Rosa, my fellow jellyfish. For the fire you bring into my life, the wild collaborations, and the help with this thesis. Without you, this would be submitted upside down.

Thank you to all the other people who brought art into my life (and the other way round): Madzia, Oliwka, Ros, Emma, Charlotte, George, Jon, Jo, Ola, Adam, Artur, Mateusz, and Iwona. And everyone else who believed in this novel.

And to all the writers before and after me who dared to write in the language other than their mother tongue. We've got this.

A Language Without Childhood

Constructing new identity through translingual writing

*The language I speak,
Becomes mine, its distortions, its queernesses
All mine, mine alone.
- Kamala Das*

It didn't feel like a choice. It felt like a spell being cast on me by an outside culture which suddenly entered the field of my childhood experience. The first time I heard it, I was instantly enchanted by the way it sounded, as well as everything it represented. By the time I was two, Communism in Poland ended and with it, the borders of my country *opened to the western world*. My childhood was flooded by American products, American clothes, and American shows. I remember breakfasts at my cousin's and her mum's attempt to copy the meals we saw on Cartoon Network. She'd fill our bowls with cereal; however, instead of cold milk, Auntie would pour hot water over Nesquik and, with delight, we watched the chocolate balls dissolve into sweet sludge. We were certain this was how cereal was supposed to be eaten.

Yet more than anything, it was the way English sounded. Speaking it meant speaking in the voices of actors, writers, and musicians I adored. I opened my mouth, and the whole world came out.

Even before I learned it well enough to form a coherent sentence, I knew English was a language I wanted to *live* in. I had a game in which I would pretend to speak it, making up sounds which to my ears, resembled the real thing. My cousin and I held whole conversations in that fictional language. The game had only one rule: our version of English had to be convincing, and sometimes even we found ourselves fooled by these words-nowords, thinking that we were making sense before we could *make sense out of it*.

An enchantment, or a form of possession as I describe this experience in my novel, *Traces*, which tells a story of two cousins who grow up in post-Communist Poland. As

Poland entwines itself in the western culture, so do the girls become obsessed with the idea of living in another country, the mythical *abroad*. Their dream enters their consciousness through the language, or rather a new identity it manifests itself as. “I am possessed by an English girl,” says Kasia, the older cousin and the protagonist of the novel, “[...] I feed the girl late in the evenings, the diet of Cartoon Network and songs from my parents’ foreign CD’s. On weekends, I do nothing but eat new English words, even though I don’t understand what most of them mean”¹.

Kasia believes the language is a gateway to something which runs much deeper than words. English offers her a chance to break out of her Polishness; a chance to construct a new identity, one freed of restrictions imposed by the culture she was born in.

“For those who do succeed at the translingual enterprise, the creation of a new voice means the invention of a new self”², writes Steven G. Kellman in *the Translingual Imagination*, his excellent study of this phenomenon. What does success mean in this context? Can one ever write well in a language other than her mother’s tongue? What sacrifices one must make when going through this linguistic transition? Does finding a new voice in a second language means losing one’s native tongue?

Although there is no single way to describe ‘translingualism’, and for critics like Kellman, the act of writing in a non-native tongue can on its own be enough to place one under the translingual umbrella; the discussion of the topic with Vesna Goldsworthy (a Serbian author writing in English) prompt me to challenge the extension of the term. Simply writing in a non-native tongue might not be enough to call a writer translingual. It is the self-awareness with which one approaches the process; the exploration of one’s fluid identity; the

¹ *Traces*, p. 122

² Steven G. Kellman, *The Translingual Imagination* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), p. 66

boundaries broken and formed when expressing oneself in another language; and the formulation of the new identity, unsettled, expansive, impossible to delimit.

For generations, even writers who expressed themselves in other languages with impressive ambition, fluency, and originality; notoriously doubted their own abilities, as did the poet, Marina Tsvetaeva who produced literary work in German, French and Russian, yet claimed that “no one can ever achieve anything of significance in a foreign language”³. Or English-writing Spanish poet, George Santayana who believed that “no poets can be great who do not use the language in which their mothers sang them lullabies”⁴. One of the writers often put on the translingual pedestal is Vladimir Nabokov, whose *Lolita*, written originally in English, might be more famous than anything he wrote in Russian. Nabokov also successfully self-translated his work back and forth between Russian and English and spoke and wrote fluently in French. And yet, all three languages were used interchangeably in his childhood household⁵. Most translingual writers started learning their second language early, so coming of age meant also coming out of one language and into another.

This happened to Eva Hoffman, whose memoir *Lost in Translation* explores this process in incredible detail. At the age of eleven, Eva leaves beloved Poland, her native country for “a place called Canada [which] fills [her] with a sort of horror vacui”⁶. Her transition is challenging and often painful. For a long time, Eva struggles to find herself in the new language (the language in which she will later write her exceptional memoir). The struggle has less to do with memorising words or comprehending English grammar; but with

3 Marina Tsvetaeva in the letter to Rilke: *Languagehat.com*, ‘No Language is the Mother Tongue’, November 30, 2015. < <https://languagehat.com/no-language-is-the-mother-tongue/> > [accessed 10 February 2022]

4 Kellman, p. 25

5 John Calapinto, Nabokov’s America, *The New Yorker*, June 30, 2015.
<<https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/nabokovs-america>> [accessed 03 January 2022]

6 Eva Hoffman, *Lost in Translation* (London: Vintage Books, 1998), p. 85

something much more fundamental: “[...] the problem is that the signifier has become severed from the signified”⁷.

The words I learn now don’t stand for things in the same unquestioned way they did in my native tongue. “River” in Polish was a vital sound, energised with the essence of riverhood, of my rivers, of my being immersed in rivers. “River” in English is cold – a word without an aura. It has no accumulated associations for me, and it does not give off the radiating haze of connotation. It does not evoke.⁸

To write well means to do exactly what English fails to do in Hoffman’s description. It is not enough to understand the meaning behind the word; to provoke the desired feeling in her reader, one needs to *feel* it oneself. How does one build a relationship with a new language from a scratch? A relationship which could be translated into words?

Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, known better as Joseph Conrad, found himself in English only in his twenties, the third after Polish and French; yet this was the language he chose to write in. “If I had not written in English I would not have written at all”⁹, he confessed, a statement many translingual writers could identify with. These writers decide to travel beyond the borders of their mother’s tongue and through their journey, explore the concept of identity. Their choice can be seen as an act of resilience against the myth of monolingualism and cultural hegemony; but also, as an intimate journey into one’s relationship with herself and the world around her.

⁷ Hoffman, p. 106

⁸ Hoffman, p. 106

⁹ *Culture.pl*, 27 September 2007. < <https://culture.pl/en/article/how-joseph-conrad-formed-an-identity-as-an-english-novelist> > [accessed 20 December 2021]

There are many reasons why one decides to write in a language non-native to her; the most obvious being immigration or living in a country which loses its autonomy to the ruling of another. “Language is a social phenomenon, a function and an instrument of institutional power”¹⁰ Kellman reminds us. In multilingual nations, choosing to write in Gaelic, Kaszubski, Basque or Catalan can be seen as an act of resistance, the rejection of “the cultural and political hegemony of a language that is frequently the first one [these writers] spoke”¹¹. In 1991, the Republic of Belarus gained a status of an independent state, and it was expected to follow the path towards cultural and political independence of other former Soviet countries. However, in 1995, Russian was reintroduced as the second language in result of which, Belarusian was removed from most public spheres. Although Russians constitute the minority of the country; 63 percent of the population currently communicates solely in Russian, including at home, even though over a half of the citizens name Belarusian as their mother tongue¹². It is more common to hear Belarusian being spoken outside the borders of the country, as it happens in Grodek, Poland where Basovisca takes place, the biggest and oldest festival of Belarusian rock music. Often referred to as the festival of culture in exile, Basovisca brings political urgency to the relationship between language and national identity.

Speaking English had a metaphorical dimension in a former Soviet country. With Communism ending and Poland becoming a rapidly expanding market for the foreign goods; adapting a western tongue could have been seen an act of going beyond the borders established in the previous decades. Before the nineties, my parents didn’t even dream of travelling further than East Germany and suddenly we were able to jump in the car and drive

¹⁰ Kellman, p. 102

¹¹ Kellman, p. 102

¹² Yuliya Brel, ‘The Failure of the Language Policy in Belarus’, *New Visions of Public Affairs*, Volume 9, Spring 2017 (p. 60)

all the way to Austria. Yes, the journey took us twenty-four hours, thirteen of which consisted of standing in the longest road traffic, each car thoroughly searched by the border control; however, we had never felt so free before. As the physical borders opened so did the borders of our imagination. It was now common to plan holidays *abroad* and fifteen years later another dream became possible. Poland was about to join the European Union. It was no longer required to have a visa to work and live abroad.

The longing for the western world is one of the main themes appearing in translingual literature, and one I explore in my novel through two narratives, Kasia's and her grandmother's, *Babcia*'s. Although, the dream of travelling abroad existed in Poland for generations; the longing I felt growing up in post-Communist Poland was different from the one experienced by my parents and grandparents living under the Soviet regime. I longed to have more and be more, while they dreamt of having *anything*. For a citizen of Poland of my parents' childhood, *the west* was a mythical land, inaccessible to most. In collective imagination, one place in particular gained the status of the utopian destination. America, the country where 'dollars fell from the sky', and the country where *Babcia* migrates at the start of the novel.

In 2004, Poland joined the European Union creating a huge shift in the collective immigrant imagination. Once visas were no longer required to work and live in other member countries; it was Britain which gave way to America in my own *dream of the abroad*. The geographic proximity; legal accessibility; and similitude of our cultures (an assumption later challenged by the reality of my experience); made it easier to imagine travelling to the UK than to settle on another continent.

Later, it was Britain which was awarded this reputation (the currency had, of course changed, but also for the better – a pound was worth more than a dollar); however, the English Dream was going to be dispelled a few years after Poland joined the European

Union. In the age of instant communication and cheaper flights, all shades of immigrant's experience could be quickly revealed.

Babcia's story is reconstructed by Kasia, who learns about her grandmother's life abroad from phone calls and letters the family gets. It is not obvious, however, if some of the events happened as Kasia tells them, or if they've been altered, enlarged, exoticized to fit with her own idea of what America might be like. And yet, as the novel progresses, more and more often the reader hears what seems like *Babcia's* real voice; one which doesn't hide the painful parts of the immigrant's experience:

Some places are tough. There is a man who makes *Babcia* clean everything twice following her around the house the whole time. At night she barely sleeps, certain she can hear him breathing outside her bedroom door. The first chance she finds, she moves out. [...] One woman doesn't pay *Babcia* at all. At the end of the week, she opens her purse and sighs. Benia, I don't have anything, let me pay you later. If *Babcia* says anything, she's threatened with police.¹³

English for *Babcia* becomes the language of survival, picked up quickly and at random, like food grabbed on the way just to fill one's stomach. At first, It's the language she uses to navigate the practical matters: to do shopping, find a new job, send money to Poland. She speaks in a simple, syncopated manner, mainly in nouns. However, she experiences the sense of beyondness of the language for the first time early in the novel when she starts working for the family with two children. They seem to understand the stories she tells them in Polish even though they don't speak her language. *Babcia* believes it's the result of certain

¹³ *Traces*, p. 40

openness children seem to possess: “Children have good hearts, open to human sorrow [...] They don’t need to know the language to understand what you say”¹⁴.

It is when she meets Velna, a woman she works for, but more importantly befriends, that *Babcia* finds the ability to express her feelings in English. After a long and traumatic journey, she arrives at Velna’s house. ‘You’re tired,’ Velna says and as *Babcia* repeats these words “she realises she never thought she’d be able to say in English what she really feels, but in these words there’s her whole journey, her struggle, her prayers”¹⁵. *Babcia* has found her river.

In the later part of the novel, *Babcia* ends up in Los Angeles taking care of two girls. Although her English is good enough to help the family with everything, including giving advice on children’s upbringing; she constantly switches between two languages to the point where the girls start picking up Polish. “A translingual writer resides between languages”¹⁶, Kellman says, and it is indeed in this inbetweenness that *Babcia* finds a sense of belonging so strong, Kasia suspects it was what made her decide to return to Poland. If she stayed any longer, she would be able to start a new life in America instead:

They can ask her some questions in perfect Polish and sometimes it takes *Babcia* a moment to find herself back in the right language. The longer she stays in America, the tougher transitions become, her mind finds itself empty for a split second, unable to grab onto any word in any language, but instead of making her anxious, this experience calms her down. She wishes she could stay in this wordless moment a little longer.¹⁷

¹⁴ *Traces*, p. 54

¹⁵ *Traces*, p. 123

¹⁶ Kellman, p. 41

¹⁷ *Traces*, p. 267

Kasia longs for a different life, one she could spend with her cousin, Ania, in a country where nobody would know who they are. They dream of the bohemian art scene and landscapes from Victorian books they devour. Their image of England the cousins construct is based on literature, music, and films they love. It is idealised, stylised, and full of vibrancy they don't find in Poland, the country constrained by the mundanity of their everyday life. It is born from the language in which everything sounds new, better, exciting. However, for Kasia it is also a deep sense of misplacement that drives her towards *the abroad*. She can't find herself amongst her peers, she gets bullied for the way she looks (too tall) and struggles to fit with the cultural ideas of girlhood. In England, she believes she could be someone else. In English, she would no longer be Kasia, but Katie.

The language transforms from a fascinating foreign into a long-lost familiar emerged from the deeper sense of selfhood. It seems like metamorphosis is an inescapable motif in translingual literature, one explored through the (self-)conscious usage of the new language itself.

By the time I turned sixteen I was fixated on the idea of becoming a *British writer* and in my sixteen-year-old mind only two things were required to fulfil this dream: a certain geographical location and the English language, learned to perfection. I believed that by moving to Britain I would finally feel like my true self.

At that point I was willing to sign a contract with the devil and sacrifice my Polish for English, the language which made everything beautiful and exciting. In my school I became known as an 'expert' even though, or maybe exactly because, my answers to all grammar and syntax issues were always correct and always summed up by 'because it sounds better'. I was attuned to English and often joked that I must have spoken it in my previous life, a joke which at times I believed. At the age of eighteen I applied to Queen Mary College, and while

my friends moved to big cities in Poland, I moved to the biggest capital in Europe. My dream was about to become reality.

“I’ve never been prim before, but that’s how I am seen by my peers”¹⁸, confesses the narrator of *Lost in Translation* in the section I underlined and read numerous times to my British friends, as this fragment so perfectly captures the disappointment experienced as one struggles to find one’s past self in the new language. When I moved to England, I thought my English was good, but soon I learned that grammatical correctness and the knowledge of idioms only captured me in a strange paradox: I sounded like I could speak it, but the language I used lacked personality, character, humour, or reflex. “Ah, the humiliation, the misery of failing to amuse!”¹⁹ cries Eva and my body tenses as I return to those moments when I couldn’t respond the way I wanted to, not because I didn’t understand what was being said; but because to use the ‘right’ word, the word which would allow me to reveal the self I previously identified myself with to others, to show my playfulness, my grace, my sharpness, required so much time, so much strategy, it was always too late when I finally found it.

This willed self-control is the opposite of real mastery, which comes from a trust in your own verbal powers and allows for a free streaming of speech, for those bursts of spontaneity, the quickness of response that can rise into pleasure and overflow in humor. Laughter is the lighting rod of play, the eroticism of conversation; for now, I’ve lost the ability to make the sparks fly.²⁰

¹⁸ Hoffman, p. 118

¹⁹ Hoffman, p. 118

²⁰ Hoffman, p. 118

Like Eva, I found my *self* lost in the new language, but more importantly I lost a sense of continuity as if the person I was in Poland simply didn't board the plane I took to England. I arrived someone else, someone I didn't know.

Translingual writing is a constant dance with liberations and restrictions in which the question of permission to write in another language is the music; while the author is a dancer mixing up the steps of the studied choreography, sometimes with the purpose of reinventing them, other times, by accident.

Joseph Conrad spoke English with an accent so strong, even his wife, Jessie could not at times understand him²¹. And yet, it was English which placed Conrad among the best writers, native in this language; the same English which, according to Kellman, never fully disguised the author's translingualism. Kellman brings up a series of examples where the native Polish seeps through Conrad's prose:

In *The Secret Agent*, when Conrad states that Adolf Verloc "pulled up violently the Venetian blind" (84) and that, gazing at Winnie Verloc, Ossipon "was extensively terrified of her" (254), the calques of word order and choice betray the traces of incomplete translingualism. In the *Joy of Motherhood*, when Buchi Emecheta tells us that Nnu Ego's daughters "never really had sufficient to eat" (9203) and the lawyer Nweze "intervened...timely" (216), the Anglophone reader can suppose that these are calques of the author's native Ibo.²²

This unique position gifts the translingual writer both the opportunity to be original and innovative, as well as the burden of self-doubt. No word can ever be taken for granted, and

²¹ Kellman, p. 44

²² Kellman, p. 45

every sentence might reveal itself as an imposter. For a native writer a mistake can be corrected and forgotten. For a translingual writer an error might mean that after all, the language she chose to write in hasn't *chosen* her. Failing to express oneself fluently in another language is the failure to express something fundamental, one's authentic self.

By structuring sentences in a second language, one constantly faces choices native speakers are often spared of, such as picking between words which have no translation in her mother tongue. Writing in a second language is strange. Or is it *weird*? In my native Polish the second word doesn't exist, to achieve the same meaning I would have to spend some time describing its flavour. Yet in English, it functions as a synonym used over and over by my friends, and I would probably accept its interchangeability if not for my obsessive craving to get the 'right' word, one that conveys more than a meaning; one which carries the emotion I'm trying to evoke in a reader.

No word can be taken for granted. Spoken in a certain situation it might become forever married to the emotions felt in it; read on a page of a book it will entwine itself in the image or memory it is shown.

In a dictionary, a Polish word is separated from the English translation by an invisible line which runs neatly along the whole page. I find myself standing on this line a lot, reaching for words from both sides simultaneously. When the river Thames became 'my river', Biała and Wisła still responded to this calling although when in my mind I channel the English word (river!), it is always the Thames which comes running down first. This is not the rule though, as often Polish words evoke memories I formed in English. Nothing ever settles, nothing allows finality. Translingualism embraces impermanence. "Two languages, two lands, perhaps two souls.../Am I a man or two strange halves of one?"²³ asks the poet Joseph

23 Tom Deneire, 'Two Strange Halves of One?'. A Poetological Comparison of Joseph Tusiani's Latin and English "Standstill", *Humanistica Loveniensia* Vol. 59 (2010), pp. 329-341

Tusiani, an Italian immigrant writing in English. Who are you right now is always different from who you were a moment earlier, and structuring even one sentence in a second language magnifies this fluid and undefined aspect of one's identity.

“” Let me see you, let me see you [...] Did you turn into a real American?””²⁴, Eva is asked by Danuta, a friend from the past when she visits Poland as an adult. After living abroad for eighteen years, she's expected to have *assimilated*. “” Half and half””²⁵, she is diagnosed after a careful inspection.

Although she longed for Poland, during her visit Eva realises she no longer belongs to the country she loved as a child. She knows how to 'act', but her behaviour is a performance of Polishness, and she keeps being seen by her old friends as someone else, an Americanised version of herself. But she doesn't feel American either, although in the way she is now, she recognises the qualities of her behaviour which can be deemed as such by her Polish friends:

[...] my face has become more composed, more controlled than the faces of women around me. I move in a more “American” way too – with looser, more resolute strides. I've allowed my body a certain straightforward assertiveness; but I've inhibited the capricious, impulsive mobility of expression that's the sign of the feminine here. Danuta's features and mine carry within them different ideologies of femininity, different loci of restraint and expression.²⁶

After she returns to New York, Eva wakes up one day having dreamt a peculiar dream in which English words flirt with their Polish cousins forming surprisingly poetic couples. The language of her dream is full of metaphors and rhymes, but “this is the most important thing:

²⁴ Hoffman, p. 236

²⁵ Hoffman, p. 236

²⁶ Hoffman, p. 236

that it was in English, and that English spoke to me in a language that comes from below consciousness, a language as simple and mysterious as a medieval ballad, a gnostic speech that precedes and supersedes our analytic complexities”²⁷. It’s kind of an urban legend one hears shared amongst fellow immigrants: the moment you start dreaming in your second tongue, that language becomes your own.

When I moved to England, I spent my first couple of years analysing the contents of my dreams. If my Polish friends or family appeared in them, were they speaking Polish? Was I speaking English to them? And in the morning, as I was trying to recall those details, was I doing it in my first or second tongue?

In translingual imagination there always seems to exist an alternative life, one narrated in the mother’s tongue. What would my life be if I wrote it in Polish? What adjectives would I use to describe it, what metaphors would guide me through the emotions I would struggle to express over and over? Through this narration, who would I become? Constrained by the culture of my upbringing, would I make different choices? Or would my sense of self be more defined? My desire to belong reassured?

When I read books in Polish, I notice an almost baroque frivolity as adjectives and adverbs, so controversial to English writers, run around sentences with childlike innocence. Cormac McCarthy is a minimalist in Polish, but the coldness of the original doesn’t translate easily so I notice the added words and sentences rearranged in a way which warms the text like the fire carried by the Child in *The Road*. As I finish talking to my family on the phone, a British friend of mine turns to me concerned and asks if everything’s okay. I reassure her that we haven’t argued, actually it was a wonderful conversation, this is just how we speak in Polish. I tell her that without raising my voice the same way I would in Polish. I tell her that

²⁷ Hoffman, p. 243

in my English voice, although this voice arrives in Polish accent and sprinkled with metaphors unfamiliar to my friend.

The longer I live in England, the less certain I am of how I'd define myself and smile at the idea of my sixteen-year-old self who saw herself as a future British writer. Although I have both passports, neither nationality seems to define me; however, it is the language where I find myself best, my version of English, always 'almost' perfect, which in some way, like my accent, fails to completely disguise my *other* identity. And although I struggle through every word, questioning the syntax, the grammar, the commas, questioning my right to write in the second tongue; like Conrad, I find myself desperate to write in English, for otherwise I would not write at all.

Essay Bibliography

Books

- Alvarez, Julia. *Something to Declare*. Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1998.
- Alvarez, Julia. *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents*. New York: Plume, 1992.
- Diaz, Junot. *Drown*. New York: Riverhead Books, 1996.
- Guo Xiaolu. *20 Fragments of a Ravenous Youth*. London: Vintage Books, 2009
- Hoffman, Eva. *Lost in Translation*. London: Vintage Books, 1998.
- Kellman, Steven G. *The Translingual Imagination*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 2000.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Speak, Memory: An Autobiography Revisited*. London: Penguin, 2000.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Strong Opinions*. New York: Vintage Books, 1990.
- Tryzna, Tomek. *Panna Nikt*. Warszawa: „B&C” P. Bagiński, 1995.
- Veteranyi, Aglaya. *Why is the Child Cooking in Polenta*. Dalkey Archive Press, 2012
- Yorke, John. *Into the Woods: Why Stories Work and Why We Tell Them*. London: Penguin Books, 2013.

Journal and Newspaper Articles

- Brel, Yuliya. “The Failure of the Language Policy in Belarus,”. *New Visions for Public Affairs*, vol. 9, Spring 2017, pp. 59-74.
- <https://cpb-us-w2.wpmucdn.com/sites.udel.edu/dist/4/10696/files/2018/01/6-1dsju93.pdf>. Accessed 03 January 2022
- Calapinto, John. “Nabokov’s America”, *The New Yorker*, 30 June 2015,
- <https://www.newyorker.com/books/page-turner/nabokovs-america>. Accessed 03 January 2022.
- Deneire, Tom. “Two Strange Halves of One?. A Poetological Comparison of Joseph

Tusiani's Latin and English "Standstill", *Humanistica Lovaniensia*, vol. 59, 2010, pp. 329- 341.

Hansen, Julie. "Introduction: Translingualism and transculturality in Russian context of Translation", *Translation Studies*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2018, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14781700.2018.1434087>. Accessed 03 January 2022.

Mousley, Andy. "Autobiography, Authenticity, Human, and Posthuman: Eva Hoffman's "Lost in Translation", *Biography*, vol. 35, no.1, 2012, pp 99-114. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/23540935> . Accessed 03 January 2022.

Rogoff Seth. "A Conversation with Ornela Vorpsi on Eroticism, Sexual Abuse and Harassment, and Selfhood", *Epiphany*, 26 April 2018, <https://epiphanyzine.com/features/2018/4/26/a-conversation-with-ornela-vorpsi-on-eroticism-sexual-abuse-and-harassment-and-selfhood>. Accessed 03 January 2022.

Wanner, Adrian. "Writing the Translingual Life: Recent Memoirs and Auto-Fiction by Russian-American and Russian-German Novelists", *L2 Journal*, vol.7, no. 1, 2015, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/85t9d1xh> . Accessed 03 January 2022.

How Joseph Conrad Formed an Identity as an English Novelist. Culture.pl, 27 September 2007, <https://culture.pl/en/article/how-joseph-conrad-formed-an-identity-as-an-english-novelist> . Accessed 20 December 2021.

No Language is the Mother Tongue. Languagehat.com, 30 November 2015, <https://languagehat.com/no-language-is-the-mother-tongue/> Accessed 10 February 2022

TRACES

1

I came out of *Mama*'s broken pelvis with a broken collarbone.

'You were strengthened at birth,' *Babcia* said, the words she repeated every time she recalled that day.

It was the year a gas leak in Białystok killed a whole street. The street Grandfather walked pushing me in the pram.

'We could have died that day,' he'd tell me the story later whenever I fell ill. A story like that, he believed, would bring me the energy to fight any disease.

'If you conquered death, what is flu to you?' he'd laugh.

Ania was born a year later. She came out earlier than planned. She weighed nearly nothing and was kept in the hospital for a month, where she slept in the incubator and was fed through a tube.

You had to wear special gloves if you wanted to touch her.

Two months later, Communism in Poland ended. That night the whole of Białystok came out onto the streets despite the government's curfew. Our parents left us with our grandparents and stayed out until dawn, hanging out at the local park, even though that night was later reported to be the coldest in a hundred years.

'That night,' *Mama* told us. 'Grandfather kissed *Babcia* on the lips.'

Something neither Ania nor I would ever see ourselves.

'It was the first time,' *Tata* added. 'When good people felt good and bad people felt bad.'

In the first months, the world didn't sleep. The shops opened their doors in the dark hours of mornings and kept them open long after the evening Mass ended. As if conjured by a wave of a wand, new products appeared in the windows. We stared at them with mouths open, breathing the air onto the glass.

Our grandparents watched sceptically as our parents stacked up on bags of Chio-Chips crisps, cans of German coffee, and thick bottles of Coca Cola, which Grandfather refused to touch. *Mama* packed her sewing machine into a cardboard box and hid it in the darkest corner of our Grandparents' basement, where it sat for decades, waiting at first, then completely forgotten. Now she ordered clothes from colourful magazines which burst out of our post box along with leaflets announcing new businesses and restaurants. *Babcia* told her it was a waste of time, but our *mamas* shook their heads and rolled their eyes pointing at the TV screen where young women paraded on the catwalks in Milan or Paris. To look 'Polish' meant to lack a sense of style. Our *mamas* didn't dare throw their old clothes away, but now we only saw them being worn at home. *Babcia* grabbed her head when the following year they brought her bags of shirts and skirts they didn't like.

'But maybe Kasia or Ania could wear them when they grow up? Such nice skirts, elegant dresses!'

A drop of saliva flew out of Auntie's mouth as she cried in shock.

'*Mamo!* This is pretty? Elegant? *O-hy-da!*

She rummaged through the bags fishing out different pieces of clothing. Calling anything disgusting was the ultimate sign of ungratefulness, one of the biggest sins in *Babcia's* decalogue. She crossed herself, *w imię Ojca i Syna*, then turned to me.

'Maybe you'd like a dress like that? I can tailor it for you.'

'*Mamo!*' *Mama* cried.

Like a river whose chain had just been lifted, the import of goods flooded us from Europe and America.

The language expanded.

It filled with names of foreign brands which arrived mysterious and unconfirmed, so at first the foreign words were made to adjust to the rules of Polish grammar until ads on TV, dubbed and in colour, revealed the right pronunciations. Still, people failed to get it right.

‘I don’t understand this,’ a shop assistant waved her hand at the man who struggled to pronounce the name of a new shampoo. ‘Speak Polish, mister. They make us into *debile*, cretins. What are we? Americans?’

Everything grew taller and wider. Factory lines were no longer shown on the evening news, and instead shops and offices, wide and with ceilings so high we thought we were watching a broadcast from the western world. The empty spaces were exhibited with more pride than all the imported goods. A call for more. There's always an extra spot. Nobody will be rejected.

Even people who were nothing before could be something now. While Ania's parents applied for council positions, my parents thought about starting their own business, so *Mama* no longer had to deal with rude patients, but could choose the ones she wanted to treat. Grandfather tapped his forehead with his index finger, 'you crazy woman', when *Mama* shared their plans with him. Four years had passed, but he still didn't believe that Communism ended for good. He warned us that it just moved underground, in a coma rather than dead. He kept old coupons in the drawer of the night table.

'You must never touch them in case...' he'd say but would never finish. Like everyone else in our family, Grandfather believed that if you said something bad you could *wykrakać* it, croak it out, the words like spells making it real. So, whenever you worried it was best to stay silent and knock on unpainted wood, or better, pray.

When *Babcia*, our grandmother left for America the first time, it was still during Communism, so people only had what the government allowed them to have. Our family like everyone else was sent coupons each week for which you could get the bare minimum of food and hygienic products, but the shops were always empty and most of the time you were queuing all day for nothing.

So people travelled abroad. Bought work from agencies, bribed embassies for visas and prayed to God they came back with dollars which could get you anything on the Polish black market.

When *Babcia* left for America the first time, neither Ania nor I were born yet. My *mama* didn't know my *tata*, and Ania's *mama* was in love with someone called Mirek. She kept his photograph under the pillow and kissed it before she went to sleep each night. Then one day *Mama* found it and moustachioed his lips. Auntie said *Mama* broke her heart, but *Mama* said it was really for the best and maybe it was, because the following year when Mirek actually did grow moustache, he also got fat and married Beata, an arrogant girl from their school, who was even fatter than him. But before it happened, our *mamas* argued for days and Grandfather said he almost went crazy from all the shouting, screaming, and crying that took place in the flat. Then *Babcia* came back, and everything was normal again. No boys, no photographs under the pillows, no moustache drawn on anyone's faces.

During those years Grandfather worked in a factory and drank a lot and in secret, so when she came back, the first thing *Babcia* did was put him on an earlier retirement. She was recommended a doctor by her sister, whose husband drank almost as much as Grandfather did. Often, they drank together. The doctor asked Grandfather to step on a scale, then measured his blood pressure and examined his tongue. Grandfather didn't like the visit. I'm not a circus animal, he yelled at *Babcia* later, at least that's what our parents told us as we got older. Still, the visit proved successful and after consulting the content of the envelope *Babcia* handed him, the doctor sent Grandfather on immediate retirement.

But sometimes Grandfather wouldn't return home for the night, and then the next one and the one after that. *Babcia* didn't worry, but her children, our *mamas* did. When he came back, his breath stank of vodka and his clothes were covered in burrs.

'One day I'll walk out and never return. Is that what you want?' he shouted at *Babcia*.

'Is that what you want?' he shouted at our *mamas*.

Uncle Janek always returned home for the night, but *Babcia's* sister said it wasn't any better.

They lived like this for years. *Babcia* working more and more hours each month, until there were no more hours left in a day. Grandfather sitting in front of TV, waiting for her to come back, so he could go out and do the shopping for the money she carefully counted out for him.

Still, every so often he managed to return from his short trip stinking of vodka. He'd lock himself in our *mamas'* bedroom and sleep until he'd sober up enough to face *Babcia*, who at that point wouldn't say anything. She'd make the dinner and help our *mamas* with their homework, then clear up and iron her clothes for the following day. If she had any spare time, she would watch the news and learn that the rest of the country was running as smoothly as she was.

Our *mamas* graduated, started universities, met our *tatas*, got pregnant. For American dollars *Babcia* bought them *Maluch* cars.

Then one day, *Babcia* left again.

2

The second time *Babcia* leaves for America, I'm five and Ania is four. My last memories of her are those of rushed movements. The whole family pacing around the suitcase, *Babcia* packing and repacking, taking more and more things out of her bags, presenting her clothes to our *mamas* like one of the sellers from Jurowiecka street. *Do you want this? Do you want that?*

'America is the country for those who need it. Rich people can live wherever they want,' she tells me, her hand caressing one of three dresses she's taking with her.

'But what if you want to live there?' I ask.

'Oh, Kasiu,' she laughs, carefully placing socks in the corners of her bag. 'If you don't take care of your socks, your feet won't carry you for long.'

A lot of shaking. First our *mamas'* heads, then the whole family in our old *Polonez*. As we reach Warsaw, through the window of our car I see buildings taller than our block of flats. I can tell people here are nothing like us.

As soon as we arrive at the airport, *Babcia* wants us to leave as if this was where the real adventure starts, one she's going on alone.

'I'm fine, I'm fine,' she keeps repeating.

Only when we lie that the reason we walk her to the departure gate is to stretch our legs, does she let *Tata* help her with the suitcase.

Babcia is the oldest person in the queue.

'It used to be just me here,' she says. 'Now look!'

We stroll around the airport for a while as if free of any purpose, then *Babcia* suddenly stops to say that 'this is it.'

'Look how brave she is,' she says hugging me goodbye. 'She isn't crying at all.'

I don't say a word. I'm holding my lips tight not to disappoint her. On our way back to the car, *Mama* spans me.

'Couldn't you at least pretend you were sad? Now *Babcia* will think you won't miss her at all!'

Ania cries for three and a half hours straight. She cries even when we stop by the forest to pee.

From the day *Babcia* leaves, she's on every plane we see. Looking up, I imagine her face through the window looking down, and spotting us waving at her, shouting '*Babciu! Babciu!*' at the top of our lungs.

America is a country up above the sea, bordered off with clouds from the rest of the world. It's a thousand times larger than Poland and with so many people in it, most of them nobody knows exist.

‘When is she coming back?’ I ask *Mama* a week later. Since *Babcia* left, days have been strange and exciting, it feels as if we’re going to move somewhere too, all of us, including Grandfather. The way my parents talk about time has changed. Two hours never mean two hours anymore. It might mean the same day, the same week or sometimes, never. It depends. Everything depends on something else. Things marry things previously indifferent to one another.

‘It depends,’ *Mama* says. ‘But you know, it hasn’t been that long yet. She’s only just got there.’

‘Only now?’ Is America that far?

Mama raises her eyebrows and smiles, but she doesn’t reply, and I assume she doesn’t know herself.

We see each other every day. Ania and I are dropped off at Grandfather's in the early morning before our parents head to work. At twelve they come over for a quick meal with bags of shopping Grandfather hasn't asked for.

'Why are you bringing me all this?' Grandfather grabs his head every time he sees us in the doors.

'It'll all go to waste!' he says when he peeks inside the bags. 'What am I? A cow? To drink so much milk?'

'*Tato, Tato*, cows don't drink milk,' Auntie kisses him on the forehead. *Mama's* already in the living room wiping the dust off the *meblościanka*, the brown unit of cupboards and shelves attached to the wall, the Bible of furniture in the Polish household.

Tata buys a new cable for the TV because the old one's buzzing which makes *Mama* anxious. Uncle explains something about the water pressure and Grandfather's nodding absent-mindedly. Ania and I are chasing each other around the small flat and *Mama's* shouting at us to stop.

'Act like girls,' Auntie says when we crash into her in the hallway. We giggle and jump on the living room sofa. Half an hour later our parents are gone and we're finally alone with Grandfather. He pours us more *zupa* and if we lick our bowls clean (so he doesn't have to wash them), he'll give us a bar of chocolate each. He keeps it in one of the cupboards of the *meblościanka*, locked with a key of tiny, fairytallish size. The inside wall of the cupboard is a mirror expanding its content into endlessness, so it looks like Sesame of thousands colourful bottles and kilograms of chocolate. We're so enchanted by this spectacle we never notice where he hides the tiny key.

In the evenings our parents visit one another. We play in the bedroom while they sit in the living room nibbling on *paluszki* and drinking beer. They put on Pink Floyd, the Beatles or the Doors and every so often we hear them sing a single line of chorus in their version of English. Uncle tries to translate some lyrics and as they get drunker, their translations grow vulgar and at that point *Mama* checks on us. We're drawing or playing with plastic animals, which Grandfather bought us at the local kiosk, Noah's Ark but without the boat or Noah, so we turn it into a zoo. We pretend we haven't been listening to their conversations, although all animals stand right by the door.

Our parents talk about important things like the Polish economy and the prices of food. As the night grows darker and the streetlamps light up, they finish the beer and

move to something stronger, something one of them has been brewing for a while, something for special occasions.

Whenever they mention *Babcia*, we stop playing and press our ears to the doors in hope to catch meaningful words. But they never say when she's coming back, and I wonder if it's because they worry they might croak something out.

When it's time to go home, *Mama* calls a taxi and it's exciting to be driven home by a stranger, someone who has no idea where we came from or where we're going next.

On some days in the mornings before we go out, *Tata* catches *Mama* in a quiet embrace. She's been rushing between rooms and tasks, and it seems like she's about to flee. They remain in the embrace and I jump around them until they open their arms and coat me like a bird in its parents' wings. *Mama* tells us she loves us, and *Tata* and I smile at each other before they open their arms, this time inviting the whole of the flat in, the chores, responsibilities, and the issues which haven't occurred yet, but we better be ready for them, *Mama* says. Better always be ready.

The summer's long and hot that year. Every Sunday after the Mass, my parents take me to *Planty* park where we eat milk-flavoured ice cream and grilled sausages with *ogórki kiszzone*, pickles from the sausage stand. The man who serves them is grumpy, but *Tata* makes him laugh with a joke about Communism which I don't understand. The three of them stare at me nostalgically.

'It hasn't been that long,' the man says. 'And already they don't know.'

The sausages are hot and we're sweating as we eat them fast. We arrive at the big fountain, the pride of Białystok, where children run barefoot screaming every time the water blasts out. *Tata* nudges me in the shoulder and with his head beckons at the fountain, and a moment later we take off our shoes, all three of us. Later *Mama* complains that her feet are wet and she can't put the shoes back on, but she does it through tears of laughter.

These are the only afternoons we spend under the spell of the present moment, our conversations never leaving the area of the park. Until one Sunday *Tata* mentions *Babcia*.

He says there was no reason for her to go to America.

He says she should have stayed.

'What are you talking about?' says *Mama*.

'You know what I'm talking about.'

'*Cicho*,' she hisses. 'The child's listening.'

Later that day I repeat his words to Ania. We're in her bedroom playing with her *Tata's* collection of lead soldiers we aren't supposed to touch.

'So what?' she says without looking up.

'I thought you'd want to know.'

'Why?'

I shrug.

'I don't know.'

'I don't want to play anymore,' she says killing my whole army in a single sweep.

It is Grandfather who takes care of us these days, but he doesn't realise we also take care of him. At his flat we're told to follow simple rules. No shouting, no screaming, no crying otherwise he'll go crazy like his sister did after she had her first child.

Only a year older than Ania, I'm responsible for us obeying the rules. It isn't easy. In the first few years of her life Ania cries a lot, mostly over nothing. I have to remind her of Grandfather's sister and what madness made her do.

'She placed her infant in a pot of boiling water thinking it was a chicken. Lucky her husband saw it, but his skin got properly burned.'

Even though Ania says she doesn't believe these stories, they do shut her up. Sometimes she covers her ears and promises she'll never cry again. Sometimes even if she doesn't cry, I make new stories up.

Every so often Grandfather tells me the story from The Past, about himself, a responsible child, as if renewing the agreement between us. Like him, I have to obey no matter what, even if it means breaking other rules.

'When I was your age, Kasiu,' he says in a serious voice reserved for adult issues. 'My parents used to send me to the fields alone and I had to feed the cows, big and fat ones, twice my height. And sometimes, I'd lose a cow and look for it for hours, until the sun went down. But did I ever ask my parents for help?'

He snorts.

'No way. No matter how hard it was, I'd never ask. I'd pray to *Bozia* instead and she would help me find the lost cow. Just like that.'

'I was very scared, Kasiu, but I always came back with all of the eight cows.'

'Trust,' he raises his voice like a priest in a church. 'That's what it is.'

'But weren't they angry that you didn't come back home for dinner? Like you were supposed to?' I ask.

'You need to know the priorities,' he says and this new, serious word resonates with so much importance, I nod sombrely even though I don't understand it.

A week after Ania's fifth birthday. Grandfather lets us play in our *mamas'* old bedroom.

It doesn't smell of our *mamas* at all, but of dusty books sweetened with dampness, and of old clothes, the whole shop of them, even though we find nothing except Grandfather's grey suit and a leather jacket we've never seen worn.

The room is simple. A sofa which Grandfather turns into bed whenever we stay overnight, a vase with fake lilies which sits on a little table, and an old sewing machine, now the table for their first TV. The TV's been broken as long as we remember but we like to pretend we're watching it anyway. The carpet becomes the battlefield for imaginary wars we die in, or the stage for the shows we practice to perfection. We're not supposed to jump on the sofa, the very first thing Grandfather warn us of, so we start shyly, bouncing up and down, then higher and higher until the squeaking betrays us. For a few days Grandfather bans us from entering the room, but we work hard to gain this privilege back. We wash the dishes after every meal and even Hoover once. When he opens the doors for us, we promise four times we won't jump on the sofa and for two days we really don't jump.

We put our ears to the walls hoping to hear them whisper back the stories from our *mamas'* childhood.

We spend hours behind the closed doors looking for evidence that our *mamas*, like us, were children once. What did they play with? What things did they like? Did they get on as well as we do?

But their childhood seems to have flown off to America when *Babcia* left for the first time, packed in a suitcase filled with gifts for children she would soon babysit.

After hours of investigations, we discover the answer locked in another socialist *meblościanka*, a little smaller than the one in the living room. Behind the glass door we stare at the books we know keep letters inside, or photographs hidden out of embarrassment or in panic. It hides the secrets our *mamas* don't tell us about, but it takes us weeks of begging to get Grandfather to open it for us. Between the pages of books printed on cheap, yellow paper. This is where we find school notes and letters written to boys that aren't our *tatas*. Were none of those letters sent? Did Grandfather find them before they reached the post or did they come back unanswered breaking our *mamas'* hearts.

It will be many more years before we find the right moment to ask them about it. Our grandfather long dead, our grandparents' flat sold. *Mamas* will laugh before mocking

each other over fancy words they used not knowing their meaning, remembering the contents of the letters better than we would.

‘They were some boys,’ Auntie will say.

‘Some boys,’ my *mama* will confirm.

At first, we are cautious. Every day before we go home, I make sure that nothing in the bedroom looks like we've touched it. But as the time passes, I grow less attentive, allowing an occasional book to rest a night on its back, or a cabinet door left slightly ajar. I never see Grandfather enter the room so soon it becomes a little flat of our own.

And then there's the playground. The sandbox, two rusty swings, and the tyre which hangs by the rope tied over a chestnut tree. I'm scared to get on the tyre, but do it anyway, so I can help Ania who struggles to pull herself up.

Grandfather's sitting on a bench reading the TV guide like it's the most urgent news. As long as we stay in his sight, he doesn't mind what we're doing. As long as we call back when we hear him call our names.

But the day climbing the tree no longer makes us dizzy, we decide to expand the borders of the playground, beyond the places our *mamas* had claimed.

We're interested in everything that we aren't supposed to touch. Other kids in the neighbourhood gather stones and Grandfather suggests we do the same, but as soon as we try, something else draws our attention. A large snail, a frog, or a plastic toy poking from the bin.

Then Ania spots a nest that must have fallen from a branch. We chase each other to it and I get there first, but wait for Ania before I take the last few steps towards it. We walk together, slowly and when we reach the nest, we kneel in front of it.

Inside we find a single bird, naked and blind. Each of its bones, every one of its veins visible through its grey, transparent skin. Without the feathers, its trembling body looks human. I reach to pick it up, but Ania stops me.

'If we touch it, it will smell human and his *mama* will never want it again.'

I watch it open and close its tiny mouth, squealing. A bigger bird lands on a branch, turns its head around, leaves. Then another one.

'It's so ugly,' Ania says. 'Is it normal?'

'I guess.'

'Look at his eyes,' she says. 'He doesn't even have them yet.'

I turn around. Grandfather's standing by the bench, his eyes searching for us. When he sees me, he smiles and I lift my hand. I glance down at the nest.

'We need to go back.'

Ania stands up without hesitation. I remain kneeling for a moment longer, watching the bird drop onto one side, a little body of confused movements and sounds. It squeals, but either my ears get used to it or its throat has grown weaker in the short time that's passed.

I wake up in the middle of the night. I can hear it squeal.

Ania lies next to me, splattered across the bed like a jellyfish slipped out of the water and dried dead in the sun. I pull the duvet higher to cover the parts of my body exposed to the cold, but in her sleep Ania resists, so I'm forced to move closer and adjust my limbs to hers.

I'm falling asleep, but remain adrift in the ocean of alertness, never fully submerging into the world of dreams.

My parents work at the hospital, but *Mama* says it's not how she imagined her life would be and talks more and more often of starting something she could call her own. *Mama*'s a dentist and *Tata* works with cancer, which means every few days in the back seat of our car, a steel case appears the size of the Bible containing a sample, a cutting of a lung, a liver or an intestine. He's a taxi driver for anonymous organs. He takes them to the lab where they're tested, then comes back to his office and drops the samples into petri dishes, a dance floor for millions of vibrant cells. He sits over the microscope, one eye watching them dance. He'll name their moves later and the names he'll give will determine the future of the organ owners.

Sometimes he takes me to the hospital and in the office he lets me look into the microscope. He asks me what I see, and like a clairvoyant I try to interpret the changing patterns into coherence.

'They look like butterfly wings.'

This makes him laugh. He explains the cells the microscope shows are cancerous, and they move so fast because they're endlessly mutating.

'Is it good or bad?' I ask.

'From the cancer's perspective it's very good,' he says.

Mama says *Tata*'s job is depressing. All of his patients are walking corpses.

'I don't see it like that,' he says but afterwards he's quiet for a long time.

Ania's parents work at the city council. They're not lawyers, Ania explains, but something like that. They work in buildings on opposite sides of the city. After Ania and Auntie are dropped off, Uncle arrives at his office always a little too late.

'They never complain,' we hear him tell my parents. 'Nobody wants my job.'

We spend the whole autumn outside, jumping off swings and digging holes in the sandbox in search of water we hear some boys dug out. We don't return to the tree where we found the bird, and the tyre's always occupied by some older kids.

Then winter comes and in a single day all swings and holes disappear under the snow. We respond to the winter's call, build snowmen and try to construct an igloo, which collapses before it reaches our shins. Our faces are red from cold, red from running, red from all the snowballs thrown by the neighbourhood boys. Grandfather shouts at them, *swolocze*, he calls them, which means something bad in Russian. We watch the boys run off, giggling.

As the sun goes down, we lie next to each other, making angels in the snow. Sometimes we stop to gaze at the last of the white sun until our eyes begin to hurt. Then we turn to each other and laugh at the black blinking spots covering our faces.

The nights are windy and bright from the snow. Our shoes squeak as we race back towards Grandfather's flat to escape the bone-carving cold. On the staircase we fight over who will use the bathroom first. Stop outside the door and wait for a few moments, gather our breaths, then press the doorbell, she and I together at the same time, and listen for the footsteps approaching. Our cheeks red, our chests full, our mouths wide open.

On some evenings Ania's parents pick her up long before mine arrive. Often, I fall asleep in front of TV and wake up to the voice of Grandfather persuading them to let me stay. The child needs to sleep.

But *Mama* always says no.

'I hardly see her these days.'

The call comes on a Sunday, six months after *Babcia's* departure. We're having dinner at Grandfather's and once the plates are gone and Grandfather heads to the kitchen to put the kettle on, the phone rings a few times before anyone reacts, before *Mama* casts a look at the night table and Auntie gets up and half-heartedly picks up the phone, says few words in response to something *Tata's* said, then to the phone casual *halo*, and moments later bellowing at us to be quiet, it's *Mama, MAMA*.

Chairs shift. We get up and rush to surround her. She pulls the phone away from the ear so we can all hear what *Babcia's* saying. *Tata* darts to get Grandfather who comes back angry at Auntie for picking up the phone without letting him know, but a moment later, when she passes the receiver to him, his face lights up and his voice softens, *halo ha-loh*, he says, *halo* yes, we can hear you. He waves at us to give him some space, sits on the bed, and repeats *halo*. Ania and I listen with our *mamas* from the carpet, while Uncle and *Tata* stand behind us.

'We cannot hear you,' Auntie whispers, but Grandfather throws his head to the side and with a hand covers the phone.

'Let him talk to her,' says Uncle.

'But we want to hear her, too.'

'*Spokojnie*, calm down.'

'What are you saying *spokojnie* for? It's our *mama*,' she says.

'What is she saying?' Ania asks.

'I don't know...'

'Quiet!'

All eyes fix on Grandfather, on his mouth. He says we're all good, don't worry, yes, yes, we're having dinner, everyone's here, yes, *dobrze, dobrze*, I'll tell them, you too, everything's *dobrze*, don't worry, yes.

'What did she say?' *Mama* asks.

Grandfather puts the phone back on the night table. He tells us *Babcia* has landed safely. She's landed in Canada, then took another plane and now she's in Chicago, she found a job and soon she'll send us the address.

'Our *mama's* a hero!' Auntie claps her hands. She gets up and kisses Grandfather's forehead.

'You miss her,' *Mama* says to him as she gets up from bed, then starts towards kitchen. At the entry to the hallway, she pauses. 'I'll make tea. Who wants tea?'

Ania and I stare up at Grandfather who's lowered his head as if listening out for another phone call. I want to ask him more questions that he cannot answer. I want him to tell us what America looks like, what *Babcia* has for dinner, what sounds she can hear around her. Where has she been for the last six months? Has she made any friends? Is it fun? Does she feel American yet?

When she arrives at the airport, she takes the doll out of her bag and for the rest of her journey she holds it in her hands. On the plane, the doll sits on her lap and other passengers glance at her disturbed, maybe they think she's mad, a mad lady, she lost her daughter and here is her daughter's doll. She shifts in her seat as the plane takes off and grasps the doll tighter, her eyes fixed on the seat in front of her, her eyes ignoring the window and the white clouds which should never be below her but here they are, she can gather within her vision's corner, here they are, and if they fly any higher, the plane will surely arrive at Heaven's Gates. *Babcia* doesn't want to think about it and she plays with the doll's hair and her fingers twist it into tiny plaits and when the plane hits the ground, and *o mój Boże*, *Babcia's* heart drops with the plane, she's certain the way it lands is not the way it should have landed, but everyone starts clapping before the doors open and the passengers get up and it's the air which enters through the open doors which at the end, persuades her that she has arrived.

She's got seven hundred dollars to pay back. If they see her, and with the doll in her hands she can be recognised, she'll be able to pay the money back to the woman who works at the agency, the woman, a good woman who believes her.

Babcia doesn't understand what makes her so special. She doesn't understand why she gets another chance to go to America when everyone else has been rejected. She doesn't lie, she tells them how it is, she has no money and she's already been to America once. The man at the embassy gawks at her from behind thick glasses and his moustache remind *Babcia* of her *tata's* friend who drove with her *tata* in a horse carriage all the way to Russia, to fight in the War which only her *tata* came back from later, horseless, on his feet and with death in his lungs. She waits silently for the man to reject her, but instead he slams her documents with a stamp and *Babcia* leaves the embassy in shock. She must tell her sister about it, the sister who went with her the first time but didn't get to go again. But her sister doesn't believe *Babcia's* got it like that. She must have given the man something for it, money or a good lie.

'And what do I have?' *Babcia* opens her arms. 'You know I have nothing!' She turns the pockets in her coat outside.

'So why did you get it and I didn't?' the sister asks and *Babcia* shakes her head. It must be God, she decides later, God wants her to go and God's will cannot be comprehended by us, simple humans.

At the airport in Chicago with the doll in her hands, she's praying to God for help again. She's been marked by the security, soon someone'll approach her, ask her what she's doing in the language she doesn't understand. She will be sent back.

She's praying to St Anthony, the patron of lost things, her husband's, our Grandfather's namesake. She's praying to him to help her find the people who are meant to pick her up. She's praying to him to be found.

A week before Christmas we're sitting on the carpet in Ania's bedroom, drawing pictures of things we want to get. Ania's adding more and more streaks of hair to a large plastic head she could brush and style. I want a baby that pees itself when you pour water in a hole of its mouth.

'You don't want the head?' she says glimpsing over my shoulder. I shake my head.

'Weird,' she says leaning back. As I reach out to pick a crayon from the box I catch a new shape on her piece of paper.

'What's that?'

'What?'

'That.'

I point at the centre of her picture.

'This?'

'What else?'

'It's America,' she says.

Ania's America is a tight, long rope of houses and people. There are no cars, no streetlamps, and no trees. The moonless night sky is glimpsing through the narrow gaps between the thick squares - buildings punctured with windows like a cheese grater. People, all pink-faced and with little variations in heights and weights, are standing in an infinite queue like our parents during Communism.

In Ania's America everybody's smiling and carrying a bag. A bag *Babcia* took with her on the day she left. A bag containing everything she needed: some clothes, a blanket, a rosary, a pouch of Polish herbs, and a photograph of us.

Ania's America has no borders. The buildings grow all the way to the top of the page, floor after floor, no roof in sight. It's impossible to tell where the queue of people starts or if it's ever going to reach the end. The last person in the picture is missing half of his body, but he doesn't seem distressed. On his half-face a half-smile, in his half-hand a half-bag.

In Ania's America all women have long, curly hair and most men are bald while others wear top hats.

Only one person looks different. Her skirt brown against the bright colours everyone else is wearing, her hair curly, orange and short. Her body facing an unknown destination, but her head turns towards us with the biggest smile.

We help Grandfather set up the Christmas tree. It's small like a bush and its branches are wires wrapped in green plastic. Our *mamas* hate it, say they've had it since they were little.

'It's historical,' Grandfather says. 'Young people don't respect history anymore.'

'Not that kind,' *Mama* replies. Grandfather's eyes go back to the Christmas tree. I want to say I love it exactly because it's ugly, but before I do he's already back in the green armchair, which means that the topic of tree will be dropped for good.

The Christmas tree at Ania's flat grows overnight, fully dressed in lights, tinsels, and baubles. We spend hours underneath it, copying its ornaments onto sheets of paper. Ania's much better than me, and as the time passes, I find myself putting less and less effort into my own drawing. She blends the colours giving them depth and shade. Her baubles and tinsels don't need frames while I frame everything with darker pencils, as if they could cure the confused shapes I can no longer distinguish myself. She doesn't try to draw things as they are, instead allowing herself to follow the rhythm of her hand as if she isn't the one who decides where to go.

'When I grow up, I want to be a painter,' Ania says and Grandfather praises her for ambition, but then our *mamas* start saying how there's no money in art. You can always draw as a hobby but find a real job.

When they ask me who I want to be when I grow up, I reply that I want to be an American, and everyone bursts out laughing. Ania frowns.

'I think you can be whoever you want to,' she says stroking my back with her small hand. In the other she's holding the crayons, the extensions for her fingers. She's always drawing something and for Christmas she makes a gift for me: a portrait of me in a princess dress.

'To me you look like this always,' she says when she gives it to me.

Two days before Christmas we go to the supermarket to do our last shopping before everything closes. It's like the end of the world, the way people shop on that day, not only buying the things they need for Christmas meal, but everything else they can afford at the time. *Mama* has a list on her she never consults.

‘When I was your age, there was nothing in shops,’ she says.

‘So, what was their point then?’ I ask.

‘Propaganda,’ *Tata* murmurs.

The biggest queue’s in front of the massive water tank, on the right to the butcher’s. Inside, tens of carps, all silent and still. Some of them are lying on their sides on the bottom of the tank while others are stuck between one another, only their eyes moving. A few carps are floating on the very top of the water as if hoping their bellies get tickled. But as I reach my hand out, *Tata* grabs it and tells me not to touch any of them. When I ask why, he says they are dead. He tells me to pick from the ones in the middle and I point at the carp whose eyes are moving the most.

It’s dark when we get home. *Mama* fills the bath with water and *Tata* empties the carrier bag releasing the carp. I sit in the bathroom watching it swim until it’s time for supper.

The same night, after my parents have gone to sleep, I creep into the bathroom to check on the carp. He’s swimming in the darkness at a steady pace as if it was the middle of the day.

There is a carp in Ania's bathroom, too. The whole family washes itself in a sink for two days.

The night before Christmas Eve is the carp's last. I spend it in the bathroom without anyone finding out. It's cold and I put a towel on the floor to sit on, and another one over my shoulders. I stroke the carp's back as it swims around in the bathtub. I think about getting in, but I'm afraid I'll wake my parents up. When I hear coughing coming from their bedroom, I whisper *Wesołych Świąt*, Merry Christmas to the carp and sneak out of the bathroom and back into bed. A few hours later we have breakfast, after which *Tata* takes the hammer out of the cupboard, then walks into the bathroom closing the doors behind him. He comes out a few minutes later holding the carp, long and limp, by its tail.

That Christmas instead of *kompot* there are fat, plastic bottles of Coca-Cola on our table. I think Grandfather won't drink it, but when *Mama* suggests she goes to the kitchen to bring him some juice (the leftover from strawberries preserves), he waves his hand impatiently at her and passes his glass to *Tata* so he can fill it with black, fizzy liquid. Uncle takes a picture of everyone and Grandfather laughs that soon we'll all turn into an American family. We raise our glasses to that.

I love the sound of Coca-Cola.

When we finish black *barszcz*, *zupa* made of dried mushrooms we picked in September in the forest outside Białystok, Auntie collects the dishes and goes to the kitchen to bring out more food. She comes back holding a large, long platter. She exhibits it on the table between *śledzie*, pickled herrings and the bowl of *kapusta kiszona*, pickled cabbage with mushrooms and dried prunes.

It's the carp. It has been cooked in jelly and decorated with carrots and lemon halves. There are no visible cuts on his body. Only his eyes are missing.

The day everything re-opens, we join Grandfather on the trip to the Post Office, where we send our Christmas photo to *Babcia*. We wait two months for her reply.

As soon as our parents arrive we tell them about the letter. Our *mamas* want to hear it read immediately, but *Tatas* tell them to take off their coats first and calm down, please, you know Grandfather doesn't like shouting. Grandfather asks me to bring him the magnifier glass ignoring Auntie's pleas to let her read instead. Calmly, he slides the letter out of the envelope and studies it for a moment. He starts in a low, formal voice he uses whenever he picks up the phone, ready to swath away any opportunistic sellers. But as he continues, his manner softens and at the end he gets very quiet as if he's forgotten he's reading the letter to us.

From the green armchair he reads in a voice he must have used in the past when he'd put us to sleep while our parents, still at universities, attended late lectures and seminars.

'It's not how you think,' *Babcia* writes. 'Dollars don't fall from the sky. People I work for are poor, but honest. They have no money but they pay on time.'

Some places are tough. There is a man who makes *Babcia* clean everything twice following her around the house the whole time. At night she barely sleeps, certain she can hear him breathing outside her bedroom door. The first chance she finds, she moves out.

There's a woman who can speak Polish, but won't, and there's a family who only eats chicken.

'I never judge,' *Babcia* writes. 'People are different here in the same way we're different from them. But I could never live on the chicken alone.'

One woman doesn't pay *Babcia* at all. At the end of the week, she opens her purse and sighs. Benia, I don't have anything, let me pay you later. If *Babcia* says anything, she's threatened with police.

'What could I say? I know little English.'

But the moment *Babcia* finds a new house to clean, the woman immediately finds money to pay her.

'I'd tell her what I think of her,' she writes. 'But I know little English.'

Everything in America is strange. Buildings are so tall you can see planes flying around them, but only foreigners gaze up. There are thousands of people on every street, and yet you never see the same face twice. Constant rushing, busyness. You enter, you buy, you go. Once you start walking, you might find yourself walking for a very long time, just following the crowd until you reach the place where everyone seems to be going. Then, if you want to change direction, you have to find yourself another crowd, jump into it and swim back. You can never go against the tide.

The cities are bright on the inside and dark on the outside, and the very centre burns with the noise of a wedding party. But it grows quieter the further you delve into the darkness of small alleyways and unnamed paths, until the whole land begins to whisper. Whispers coming from places where people don't live but hide.

To experience America, *Babcia* needs to develop new senses, become alert to how the smell in the air can lead you astray, the brightest colours tell the biggest lies, the loudest noise doesn't carry threat. A train swims underneath the ground and the ground beneath her feet trembles like a floor in the building she hid during the War, the building which collapsed few seconds after she'd escaped it. Bells on the crossing to signalise the lights change, the urgent beeping like a whip forcing the human cattle to speed up. Lots and lots of voices in many languages she doesn't recognise.

It's not in her nature to ignore people, but in America that's the lesson she learns first. It happens when on her way to the bus stop, she's forced to buy something she doesn't want, she has no money and if she did, she wouldn't spend it on an item the seller's pushing into her hands, some plastic toy, *maszkaron* whose mouth opens and closes when a level is pulled. And *Babcia* might be new to this country, but she knows the same rules run the whole world - if she touches - she buys. She keeps rejecting the toy, ugly and tacky, which costs as much as she pays for her weekly food shopping, a carton of milk, coffee and bread. But it seems like in America there is no way to say 'no', and she shoots towards the nearest bus stop and hops on the first bus that arrives, pushing the toy into her bag with the same desperation the woman was pushing it into *Babcia's* hands.

'It's a 'yes' country,' she writes.

In America the language sounds like butter, spread on a slice of freshly baked bread. People drink coffee like Polish people drink milk and everything's fried, even potatoes. You can buy anything you want anywhere you are. Often, shops are emptier than the corners of the streets, where men and women shout products' names as if they were on fire. If you even glance at them, they grab you by the arm and sell whatever they find to

sell. *Babcia* doesn't lift her eyes, although it's hard to know where she's going when the pavement is her only guide.

Her world is a funny mirror of our own. Some places remind her of Poland, but these places hide between the Strange and the Scary. There's a Polish Church *Babcia* attends, but to get there she has to take a bus that swifts through the areas no white person lives in. She holds her bag tightly until her hands go numb and pale.

The first time she gets lost on her way to the church, she asks a homeless man for help. He asks her for money. She gives him all she has.

'Bus ticket, please, don't take,' she says.

He takes the money and for a long time she stands there waiting for him to knock her on the head, but instead he starts walking off, then beckons at her.

'Come,' he says and she follows him down the narrow streets that smell of urine and rotten meat. There, she spots the Polish church. It stands between the off-license shop and an abandoned house where some Polish people squat.

She enters the church, finds a seat in an empty pew, says *Zdrowaś Maryja Matko Boża Módl się za Nami Wszystkimi*, then very quickly walks out, without stopping to talk to anyone, to introduce herself to her new parish as she would do in Poland. Instead, she imagines talking to the priest, to other believers. She'd tell them work has brought her here and ask them what they do. Maybe someone lives in the same area? They'd get on the same bus, sit in the back row and show each other passport-size photos of their families. This is my son-in-law, this is my daughter.

'In our church I knew everyone. There was always time to talk to the priest, to chat. Here, everyone's rushing. The only people that stay are those who have nowhere else to go,' she writes.

She says in America there's never enough time. Time spills like milk when poured with shaky hands. Still, she finds time to pray for us and to think of Poland. She thinks about her *tata* a lot, who left for Russia to fight for the Tzar and when he came back everyone gathered around him and watched him take a deep breath. When he opened his eyes, they were full of tears. Why are you crying, *Tata*? *Babcia* asked him then.

'I've seen the world,' he said. 'I've seen Petersburg and Moscow. I've seen the Palaces of the Tzar. But nothing as beautiful as the Polish village.'

Then, she writes, he cried.

Babcia says she's praying for us every day. She prays that our parents have money and that we eat well. She prays that Ania and I are growing up healthy. She prays that we have clothes right for the weather.

People she works for live in a big house, bigger than Grandfather's, Ania's, and our flats combined. Most of the rooms stay empty though. The woman spends her nights outside, she has a night job and works very hard. Her husband is crippled and in a wheelchair; it's very heavy, rusty and impossible to push. But *Babcia* does push it and even carries him to bed every night before she goes to sleep herself. In the morning his wife helps her, but sometimes she needs more rest, so it is just *Babcia* again, carrying the man. He doesn't like it and curses her in his language. *Babcia* does the same then prays to God for forgiveness. Illness, she says, can turn a saint into devil.

She says people are kind. Say *thank you* and *please*. *Sit down*, when she finishes cleaning. But as soon as she does, they assign her a new task. *Alright*, she says and laughs. Laughter, she explains, can cure the worst back pain.

Over the next week we read the letter again and again until *Babcia's* words become spineless, bare sounds.

My favourite words are the ones I've never heard before. I adopt them as if they were stray kittens I found in the woods. *Thank you*, I say to Grandfather as he fills my bowl with a second serving of *zupa*. *Alright!* I reply to *Mama* when she tells me to tidy up my room. *No*, I say to Ania when she asks me if I want to play only because I don't know how to say 'yes'.

Many years later when I move to England, I'll ask *Mama* if she's kept any of *Babcia's* letters. She'll seem surprised, but maybe I'll mistake her vague explanations for the guilt she felt having thrown all of them away.

Spring fills our mouths with insects and our knees are constantly bruised and bleeding. *Tata* teaches me how to ride a bike. He attaches a plank of wood the length of his arm to the back which he holds while I pedal, failing over and over again to catch balance. After I finally get it, for a long time I'm still too afraid to ride without his assistance. For days he runs after me, holding onto the plank as I ride around our neighbourhood in perfectly straight lines. I love how the wind plays with my hair and how my legs ease into the rhythm of peddling.

‘You can go on your own!’ *Tata* yells and I know it’s true, but every time he lets go, I panic and fall.

Ania’s too afraid to get on the bike, so her parents decide to sell it to their neighbours. Even though she hasn’t used it once, she cries when they tell her what they’ve done.

‘They bought it for money *Babcia* sent them. It was her gift to me,’ she sobs.

‘They keep her there, like a slave, that’s what it is!’ I hear *Mama* shouting then Auntie’s voice *ciiciii*.

‘It’s okay now. She’s okay, you know what our *mama*’s like.’

Ania freezes and peers at me. For a while we’re listening, but soon Uncle says something about a guitar solo in a song he’s put on, and *Tata* comments, his point technical and his language precise like when he’s discussing illnesses or lab results.

I turn to Ania. She’s sitting on the bed which has become our small flat in America. I’m on the floor on the subway on my way from work. The train travels the whole city like a submarine, going through the underground tunnels. Ania, my wife, is making the dinner, a few items we’ve stolen from her parents’ fridge.

‘What does it mean ‘*to slave*’?’

‘To what?’

‘Like they said, she’s *slaving*?’

I look at her.

‘I think it means she’s a slave, like they keep her in the basement and feed her once a day,’ I say. I get up from the floor and sit next to her. ‘But she’s not a slave.’

‘Do you think we’d know if she was?’

I think for a while, but I can’t decide. We don’t know anything about the United States.

‘I think she just misses *Babcia*, that’s why my *mama*’s saying this.’

‘I guess,’ Ania says but remains uncomfortable. We keep listening out for any new words which would reveal what’s really happening to *Babcia*, but she’s never mentioned again that night.

We bring snails home, and Grandfather threatens to turn them into a pot of snail *zupa* if we do it again, which we do and every time he serves us dinner, we grow a little anxious and a little excited, stirring our spoons in search of broken shells.

Then one day as we're rummaging through the bushes, a cricket jumps and lands on Ania's shoulder. We run back home and grab two jars from the kitchen, then run back outside and fill the jars with grass. We miss two but once we get used to the way a jumping cricket feels in our hands it becomes easy to catch them. We close the jar and watch it steam up.

Back at home I open the jar to release a cricket. It jumps and my heart jumps with it. In a single quick movement, I grasp it in my hand and gently place it back in the jar. When I open my hand, I find its leg resting on my palm.

All throughout the summer a family of crickets lives in my jar. Grandfather says that crickets are vile, they eat beautiful things like butterflies and ladybirds.

I find a ladybird. I put it in the jar, but the crickets won't touch it. It sits on a blade of grass in the corner of the wall, swinging gently from side to side, yet there's something's sinister in this gentleness.

One night I dream about the crickets eating the ladybird and when I wake up, I find all the insects dead.

Ania has her own cricket family, but one day she leaves her jar at Grandfather's and the following afternoon it's no longer there. Even though he denies it, we hate Grandfather for killing them.

At the end of August another letter arrives, this time sent from a different address. *Babcia's* moved, she's still in Chicago but in entirely new part of the city, far from the centre. This is how things work here, she writes, you find a job and immediately look for the next one, just in case.

In the new house there's a grandmother, two children, a husband and wife. Parents both working, very busy people, their children, a boy and a girl, quiet and studious. *Babcia* doesn't see them much, they're always at school or taking extra classes in music and sports. Nobody tells her what to do, but she doesn't need to be told and starts as soon as she arrives.

She's shown the house. Three floors, her room on the ground floor next to Grandmother's room, children a floor higher and parents on the top floor. They mustn't be disturbed after eight pm. Eight, the wife repeats until *Babcia* writes down 'eight' in a small notebook she keeps with herself. The wife likes to see *Babcia* writing things down so *Babcia* starts to write letters to us while the wife talks to her, as well as little poems which she finishes on the sleepless nights.

And there are many unslept nights. The Grandmother she shares the wall with moans in pain for hours, a difficult illness which bends her bones and twists her tendons, and *Babcia* prays and writes and prays and prays that God gives Grandmother resilience to endure the pain.

Parents eat out in town, children eat at school and Grandmother, she's told, doesn't eat at all. She needs a glass of milk twice a day, says the wife, and the husband opens the fridge to reveal four shelves stacked with cartons of milk. *Babcia* covers her mouth with a hand. The wife shows two fingers. Two glasses, she says. *Babcia* nods and in her notebook, she drafts a shopping list.

I wonder if her illness could be cured with food, she writes and our *tatas* laugh.

'Poor *Mama*,' says Auntie patting my *mama* on the back. 'She's so brave.'

It's very hard to travel without a car. The closest bus stop is ten kilometres from the house, a two-hour walk. The closest Post Office is next to the shop on the top of a very steep hill.

Babcia organises her trips carefully, making sure she can sort out as many tasks as possible in one go, asking the family three times if they need anything, but they always say, don't worry don't worry, they have a car.

For *Babcia*, the trip to the shop is an English lesson. She walks around the aisles with her little book and notes everything down. She observes other customers to see what

they're buying, then buys the same things. Back at home she wraps each item in brown paper, then places it in the box she'll send to us later. She becomes the regular customer in the small shop. You can find everything there, envelopes, sweets, pasta, toys. The man who works there, a young dark-skinned man recognises *Babcia* the second time she walks in and says *Dzień Dobry!*

'You Polish?' she asks and he laughs, no no and for a while she doesn't feel like shopping there anymore, but the image of the fridge filled solely with milk cartons makes her come back the following day.

One night when Grandmother's moaning can be heard even on the second floor, the wife tells *Babcia* to drop a tear of whiskey into the glass of milk. Which she does. And it helps.

After a few weeks, she starts using new words she's brought from the shop on Grandmother, and when she hands her a glass of milk, *Babcia* describes what's in it, and when she places it back on the table, she makes sure she mentions the food she's recently cooked. Grandmother regards *Babcia*'s linguistic circus with the sternness of a harsh critic, but every day her face softens a little until *Babcia* spots a glimmer of admiration, a young child who sees the real performers for the first time. Sometimes she doesn't know what she's saying, but Grandmother tells her she's doing well.

'You're good, smart,' says Grandmother.

'Thank you,' *Babcia* replies.

She starts baking cakes for children who are only allowed one slice to share and only after they've practised their music. The girl plays the violin and the boy plays the piano and the parents don't play any instruments. Sometimes *Babcia* sings them a song she learned from her *tata*, our great-grandfather, when she was a little girl.

My *tata*, *Babcia* writes, had the voice of a nightingale. She tells children about him and even though she tells all the stories in Polish, they seem to understand.

Children have good hearts, open to human sorrow, she writes. They don't need to know the language to understand what you say.

She asks how we are. She says she prays for us, for our health. She says she's proud of Kasia, who's going to school, such an important event. She's proud of Ania, now she has to be helpful, make sure Kasia has time to study. She'll send us a package soon, she'll call us.

As Grandfather's voice reaches the end of the letter, I realise that we won't find out anything more about *Babcia* for at least few more weeks.

‘Can you read it again?’ I ask and Auntie turns to me, bemused.

‘He’s just read it though, Kasiu. Where have you been?’

I lower my head, trying to gather all the scattered pieces of *Babcia*’s story and build a coherent image. But with each piece of new information more questions arrive, and as I fail to find answers, I grow more frustrated so when Ania asks me if I want to play outside, I shrug her hand off my shoulder and grunt a single ‘no’. Her face sinks and I want to apologise, but instead I grunt ‘what’ and she mumbles ‘sorry’ and I shake my head and turn away.

‘At school,’ Grandfather says. ‘You’ll have to behave. No messing around like here.’

I’m the only one who’s going to school in September, but Grandfather makes sure that everyone follows the new rules. Even when parents come over, they’re treated differently now, to serve as example for us.

‘At school you need to eat everything they give you,’ Grandfather says, then for three consecutive days cooks *zupa grochowa* which nobody likes. But I never complain, like a soldier ready to endure all discomforts I face.

‘You’d be good soldiers,’ Grandfather praises us when we present our plates, shiny from licking them clean.

Less TV, as well. Now Grandfather spends most of his days correcting our postures, slapping our fingers if we point with them, and teaching us to tie our shoes in a bow so precise it looks like we’ve stolen our shoes from the shop window.

Our free time is scheduled.

‘At school,’ he says. ‘There are short breaks between the lessons, sometimes so short you can’t do much more than walk from one room to the next one.’

Only after all the dishes are washed and dried we’re allowed to play in *Mamas’* old bedroom. We make sure to use every moment of it. As soon as the doors close, we transform into characters we pretend to play. A rich American family who’s going mad.

‘My God,’ Auntie says when I bring her cutlery. ‘Does he ever give you a break?’

‘Maybe sit down and eat,’ *Mama* says to Ania, who’s double checking if everyone has a glass.

‘One, two...Auntie, you’re distracting me!’

‘When you went to school you knew how to behave and that’s why you grew up to be smart and nice to others,’ Grandfather’s voice booms above us like the voice of God from Biblical tales. Instead of Red Riding Hood, Grandfather tells us about Job, instead of the Matchstick Girl, we learn about Abraham and Isaacs. But his versions of these stories are as fairy-taiish as the stories other children hear and when he’s in a playful mood, Grandfather makes a dragon or a wizard appear in Bethlehem or Nazareth.

‘What are you saying?’ Auntie laughs. ‘On the first day of school you overslept and we were late, then *Babcia* had to apologise in front of all our teachers.’

I smile.

It surprises our parents how much we love the new routine, that we love to help Grandfather and see him proud.

‘When we were your age,’ *Mama* says. ‘We never listened to Grandfather.’

‘And I think it was healthy,’ Auntie adds. ‘You’ll turn them into martyrs, *Tato*.’

‘What’s a martyr?’ Ania asks and the word sinks deep inside me, like a treasure on the bottom of the ocean. I love how new words can mean anything before their true meaning is revealed to us. It happens rarer and rarer in Polish while in English every word, even a tiny one is precious like a pearl.

‘Ask Grandfather,’ Auntie smiles cheekily at Grandfather, who waves his hand in frustration and walks off mumbling something to himself.

‘A martyr...’ I say to myself and smile.

Grandfather believes two things can cure everything: God and coffee.

‘First, you drink the coffee and if it works, you don’t have to bother God,’ he says placing three empty mugs on the table. We’re sitting in the kitchen, our backs hot from the sun boldly staring at us through the open window. I watch him drop a spoonful of black powder into each mug, then cover it with boiling water and mix it until the only thing we can smell is coffee.

‘Does it mean we don’t have to pray?’ Ania asks.

‘Of course, you do,’ he leans over her mug. ‘But instead of asking for favours, you pray as a way of thanking God for making something that has already helped you.’

‘Like coffee?’ I say.

‘And tea, and juice, and water...’

‘And chocolate?’

‘Chocolate was made by Maryja, God’s *mama*.’ He looks at me and smiles. ‘For consolation.’

I nod.

We drink our coffee while Grandfather tells us about Noah’s Ark. In his version, Noah doesn’t believe the flood’s coming and it’s his wife who persuades him to build the Ark. In his version, there isn’t enough space for all the animals that arrived, and some of them drown once the water covers all land.

‘Frightening animals we can’t even imagine today. More like monsters than anything,’ he says.

‘Like dragons?’

He nods.

‘And dinosaurs?’

He nods again.

‘And platypus?’

‘Yes.’

‘But platypus can swim!’ Ania protests.

‘But back then the water was different, Aniu,’ he says. ‘Too deep for the platypus.’

‘But why would God want to kill platypus?’ I say.

‘He didn’t want to kill anyone, girls, but He had to show how serious He was. Otherwise, people wouldn’t believe in Him.’

‘Couldn’t He just kill Noah instead? He was the one who didn’t believe Him.’

‘Well, Kasiu, if you could decide who survives, a platypus or your *tata*, who would you choose?’

I stare at him in silence.

‘God has a difficult job, girls. It’s not just creation. It’s also destruction. He doesn’t like it, but sometimes there’s no other way.’

‘Do you think that Grandfather loves you more?’

‘No, don’t be stupid.’

‘I think he does.’

‘Why?’

‘He talks to you more.’

‘He talks to both of us the same.’

‘But looks at you when he talks.’

‘And?’

‘I think he loves you more.’

Tata and Uncle are struggling for a while but eventually the large brown box drops on the living room carpet, carried all the way from the Post Office. Auntie cries out - watch out! - and *Mama* covers her mouth and Ania and I skip like hens around their eggs. We want to open the box, but Auntie says the honour belongs to Grandfather.

Mama kneels in front of the box and Grandfather moves back. We walk over to him.

‘Weren’t you supposed to cut it?’ Ania asks. He brings a finger to his mouth *ciii*, your *mamas* need to focus.

‘But then why can’t we do it?’ I ask.

‘Right,’ *Mama* opens her palm and Auntie hands her the knife. She slices the top of the box with the confidence of a surgeon.

We can barely stand still and as soon as the top’s lifted open we dash towards it.

‘Show us! Show us!’

‘Wait, wait, girls!’ Auntie shouts over our voices but her hands are already diving deep into the box to fish out the gifts *Babcia*’s sent us.

‘Careful! Don’t break it!’ *Mama* gets up. She bends over the box but I manage to get a glance inside before Auntie pushes me away.

‘There’s so many things!’ I turn to Ania who’s jumping in one spot unable to make out the box’s content.

Grandfather steps in.

‘Make some space for the girls,’ he tells our *mamas*. ‘Let everybody see.’

‘That’s right, come on,’ Uncle joins in. I realise that he and *Tata* have been sitting on the sofa the whole time.

Grandfather makes his way to the box and our *mamas* step away to give him some space.

There’s more in the box than we received for Christmas. We sit in a circle and pass the gifts between each other. Everyone names what they’re holding and the list of items is constantly repeated like a prayer, blessing everything *Babcia*’s sent us.

The things we find in the box

- Four pair of sport shoes (Two for special occasions)
- Two plastic boxes with cartoon dinosaurs
- A beach towel with Ariel the mermaid (Ania and I fight over it for hours)
- Pink and peach towels we pass around rubbing our faces in disbelief (how soft they are!)
- Two Chicago Bulls t-shirts
- Thirty rolls of toilet paper, soft and patterned with flowers
- A box of cocoa powder
- A box of chewing gum (we can't pronounce its name but we try and try and try and try)
- Peanut butter cupcakes and chocolate bars
- Rolls of thick socks ("better than Polish")
- Bags of chocolate buttons, salted peanuts and salted cashew nuts
- A golden brooch and a bracelet our *mamas* fight over for hours
- Two plastic ghosts which shake and moan when we clap our hands at them
- And six white t-shirts ("from the good material")

We challenge each other: who can put the most of the red chewing gum strips in her mouth? I win, coughing, my eyes watery and red for the next few hours. We're disappointed with American chocolate, it tastes flat and fake to us. Uncle says Americans would say the same thing about Polish chocolate, but *Tata* and Auntie disagree with him.

'There's no tradition there, no culture,' Auntie says. 'No sophistication.'

The peanut butter cupcakes taste fake, too. Ania eats more than me to satisfy *Babcia*, who, we're certain, must know we're opening the package right now, guided by her unescapable, transatlantic intuition.

Later the same night *Mama* hides the ghosts away because our clapping and their wailing won't let her sleep.

We spend the last days of summer at Grandfather's allotment, our parents helping build the house Grandfather wants ready for *Babcia's* return. *Tata* and Uncle push wheelbarrows filled with stones, and sometimes they offer us rides and we laugh so hard we get hiccups which last for hours.

We eat unwashed carrots pulled out from the soil and the grains of soil grind like sugar between our teeth. We want to be wild, live in a forest, pee in the bushes and forage alien mushrooms. We'd wash in a river and sleep in the tree crowns. We'd sit in the darkness and bury potatoes in the soil, then dig them out, peel their crusty skin off and burn our tongues on their hot flesh.

Every Sunday we go to the church. I like to think of it with a capital letter, the Church, but Grandfather says there's a difference - the place is spelled with a small letter while it's the believers we think of when the C stands up. He's been teaching me how to write and the first thing I learn are prayers.

Because of this I've become more attentive to the Mass, imagining how the words pronounced by the priest would look on the pages of my notebook. Will they smell of incense, candle wax, cold stone?

No matter what temperature's like outside, it's always cold in the church, and when the priest's voice raises and echoes between the walls, it's as if the shiver which runs down my spine was running towards his words.

And the words land on us with ancient grandeur. We fix our eyes on the altar and I'm hypnotised by the miracle performed right in front of us. The priest holds up *hostia* pronouncing it the Body of Christ. Then, he lifts a cup and drinks the Blood of Christ, now turned into wine. I'm told a priest can never smoke nor ever get married, and yet at every Mass I watch him sip from the cup.

I tell myself that while I'm in the church, nothing bad can happen to anyone like in the stories Grandfather told us in which neither Germans nor Russians dared to attack the parishioners during the Mass.

Ania doesn't share my fascination with the church. She says she finds it boring. She hates standing still for forty-five minutes, and when I remind her of the choreography we perform throughout - the kneeling, the bowing, turning to one another to shake our hands in peace - she furrows her eyebrows.

'No,' she says. 'I don't understand.'

Grandmother dies. She was eighty-one and had been dying for the last twenty years. Difficult illness.

Babcia attends the funeral along with the family. No priest. They play songs from the radio and the children cry. Their mother's standing behind them, stiff like a statue. When the ceremony's over, the children walk over to *Babcia* and she hugs them tightly. This is the first time she hugs them since she's moved to their house.

'My children,' she says in Polish. '*Moje dziatki...*'

She prays in Polish for the Grandmother. The children are very sad. The girl weeps while stomping on her black dress, too long for her legs. Her mother found it in the wardrobe, but it doesn't fit. This is the child's first death.

Babcia folds the hem in half and threads a needle to keep it above the girl's ankles. The girl's amazed at the simplicity of this solution and for the first time in days, she smiles.

After the funeral, the guests are invited for dinner at home. *Babcia*'s been preparing the meat which the family has ordered from the butcher's earlier the same week. But only a few people come for the dinner and most of them don't touch anything but wine. The whole time *Babcia*'s worried. So much food and nobody eats.

She wants to freeze the meat afterwards, but the wife tells her to throw it away. *Babcia* agrees, but the next morning she goes to the shop and asks the clerk where the nearest shelter is. She shows him the carrier bag with beautiful red meat inside.

The man offers her money and says he'll sell it but she refuses, it's the funeral meat, not for sale. She wants to give it to people in need, homeless people, starving. The man laughs and raises one hand to his mouth tilting his head back.

'Al-co-hol,' he spells out. That's what they want.

Babcia walks out of the shop, upset. The time's running out, she has errands to do and now she begins to smell the meat. She crosses the road, looks left and right. She could jump on the bus which will take her to town, there must be a shelter there. But it's not Białystok. Once she arrives in the centre, there's thousands of roads she can choose from, and time, time passes quicker in the bigger city. In Białystok she'd be done within an hour, at leisurely pace.

For a week now she's been trying to make herself irreplaceable. The family has slipped into grief and they might think they need her, but she knows that soon they'll ask her to leave. She can't risk losing the job today. She has to make it home as soon as she can.

On her way back, she speaks to herself out loud, swear words so gentle her *tata* would use them even when the children or priests were around. Russian words for farm animals, sometimes you have to, otherwise bad emotions will brew in your gut, brew the nastiness which will rot and turn you bitter and mean. She wishes she could eat the meat herself, but she hasn't been hungry since the grandmother died and even if she was, her stomach isn't big. She'd be full after two bites.

The carrier bag seems heavier now, dead meat like dead body wants to rest on the bottom of a stomach or earth. She could leave the meat somewhere hoping someone will find it, but no, *Babcia* swaths the thought away with her free arm, what if someone spots her, crazy Polish woman leaving meat around.

Then she remembers.

There's a sad park she's gone to once but never returned to, because the park doesn't belong to humans but to dogs, large and scary, their ribs visible under their skin, thin like the grandmother's in her last days. That time she walked through, the dogs watched her, growling and baring their teeth and she prayed herself out and promised God she would never step a single foot in the park ever again.

And here she is now.

Standing outside the rusty metal gate which protects no-one if a dog decides to attack. Standing with the bag full of meat sweating the blood, which the dogs must have already detected. She imagines them coming at her from all sides, like hyenas, she'll have ten seconds, twenty if she's lucky she'll drop the bag and run.

The whining reaches her from somewhere behind. She turns around and spots two dogs, wolf sized, their bulking eyes fixed on her.

She talks to them as she turns the bag upside down emptying its content. The dogs move towards her and she moves with them keeping the distance even. She trusts this math with her life and later she'll repeat this story to us, explaining that science is the evidence of God's existence. We will be teenagers then, calling ourselves atheists and breaking her heart, but even with her heart broken she will stand her ground, maintaining the same strength she showed to the dogs ten years before.

The story ends. I turn towards Ania, whose eyes tell me she hasn't missed a word.

'And what happened then?' she asks, her throat dry.

'You know what happened.'

She nods.

'Tell me.'

As teenagers we'll be holding hands when nobody sees us but now it's only our fingers which touch. The tips of mine are tickling hers. I smile.

‘She came out.’

The day before the school starts, we're sitting at the kitchen table, watching Grandfather peel carrots he's brought from the allotment. They're fatter than the ones we find in shops and we tell Grandfather he could make fortune selling them. He laughs and I'm immediately sad. It's the first time I feel how the small beautiful moments like this one walk out on us without turning around for the final glimpse. I avert my eyes.

'It's a big day tomorrow, Kasiu,' Grandfather says.

I nod. I don't want to think about it just yet. The initial excitement of going to school has worn off some time ago. Now I don't want to go there at all, I want to stay with Ania and Grandfather, I want to play in *Mamas'* old bedroom and listen to letters from *Babcia* read over and over again, because Grandfather, like us, never grows tired of them.

Grandfather sits down next to me.

'I'm going to teach you my favourite prayer,' he says. 'You say it when something really bad happens and you feel scared and lonely.'

He says that the prayer protected him from the bullets that fell from the sky on the first of September when the War began. He was seven, the same age I am now. I listen to him, jealous of the terrible stories he carries inside.

We follow the prayer word by word, unsure what most of it means. The monotonous intonation doesn't betray where one sentence finishes and the next one starts. But the music of the words, long and crispy, calms me down just like Grandfather promised. When we're finished, I ask to say the prayer again, and again until I know it by heart.

Pod twoją obronę uciekamy się święta boża rodzicielko naszymi prośbami racz nie gardzić w potrzebach naszych ale od wszelakich złych przygód racz nas zawsze wybawiać panno chwalebna i błogosławiona o pani nasza orędowniczko nasza pośredniczko nasza pocieszycielko nasza z synem swoim nas pojednaj synowi swojemu nas polecaj swojemu synowi nas oddawaj.

Grandfather crosses himself and we follow his gesture. Ania closes her eyes, which makes her look holier.

'Amen,' Grandfather says. He stands up, picks up the bowl with peeled carrots and throws the vegetables into the water already boiling in the pot. He turns back to look at us and smiles. This will be the last dinner I have with Ania and Grandfather for a long time. I try to recall the prayer he's just taught us, but the only word I remember is Amen.

I can't sleep. The whole flat fills with fresh and cold air. Ania's allergic to dust, so all through the night the windows are kept slightly ajar. I draw my legs to stomach to rub my feet, then stretch them before I bring them back up.

Her parents sleep in the bedroom on the other side of the flat. We're separated by the bathroom, the brightest room at night and the darkest during the day. I close my eyes and try to resist the urge to turn shadows on the walls into recognisable shapes. Trying different things that would put me to sleep. Count sheep, count numbers, make stories up hoping they'll become dreams. Pray.

When I pull the duvet Ania pulls it back, her sleep undisturbed. We continue this game for a few minutes before I give up.

I gaze at the window and see tiny drops of water glistening on the glass, even though it isn't raining.

Everything dry softens at night.

3

The school starts on the day the first conkers drop from the trees. Grandfather says it's a good sign. It means I'm moving in the rhythm of the world.

Everyone wishes me good luck. I go to the shop with *Mama* to get my first backpack. I want a pink one, but it's too expensive.

'The most important thing is that it's comfortable,' *Mama* says at the till paying for the backpack I don't like. The shop assistant smiles at her in the way which suggests she's made her own child choose comfort over enjoyment. It's through the next eleven years of Polish education that I'll learn the same lesson delivered in thousand different ways - that only through sacrifice one gets what one wants.

The school building is long and ugly. Outside, it's painted the skin shade of pink, but inside all walls are white with stripes of hospital green. There's a cross in every room and the Polish coat of arms, a white eagle in a golden crown over the red background. We pass some cork boards with announcements of competitions and school events, and framed displays of the students from previous years going all the way back to our parents' time.

Mama accompanies me to the classroom. She leaves me by an empty desk in the second row and joins the rest of the parents sitting in the back. A few children are late and some parents complain about the building's labyrinth design. The teacher nods, then consults her book for the list of our names. When the room grows full and quiet, she begins to speak.

She says there are few things we need to know. From now on we'll be sharing our desk with another person but it doesn't mean we're allowed to talk to them during lessons. We can only talk to the teacher.

There are other rules she names:

- No talking.
- No eating.
- No bathroom unless during the break.
- Students who are late will not be permitted into the room.
- Books and notebooks need to be well kept.
- No bent pages or spills.
- Homework must be done, no excuses.

'No excuses,' she repeats and peers at us from behind her thick glasses, fixing them as she returns to her book. But even in the serious atmosphere, I can't contain the excitement.

A girl whose skirt and shirt are perfectly ironed sits next to me. Her *mama* made her hair up in a complex plait. I imagine the girl and I becoming best friends and this thought makes me feel restless. I want to play hopscotch with her, show her the mushrooms growing wild just outside our school. I glance back at *Mama* but she's not looking at me. I wonder where the girl's *mama* sits and think how maybe our *mamas* could become friends as well. When the introduction ends, I leave the school skipping.

Afterwards, parents take me to *Planty* park. It's full of children like me in their formal clothing, white shirts and black skirts or trousers. Every time one of them walks by my heart skips. I don't know if the possibility of bumping into someone from my new class makes me feel nervous or excited, but I can't focus on anything else while we're in the park.

When we arrive at Grandfather's *Ania*'s already there. She tells me how she saw two boys fighting in the playground and how walking with Grandfather to the supermarket, she found two złotych someone's dropped, and Grandfather let her keep. This money, he instructed her, she should buy a lottery ticket with. Found coins always bring luck. After I finish my dinner, she picks up my plate and a moment later, returns from the kitchen with a Milky Way bar. Grandfather's arguing with *Mama* over some dying plants.

'What about you?' I say tearing the wrapper open.

'Oh, no,' she says. 'I've had mine earlier.'

I am too tall to make friends at school. Two days after the term starts, all the girls in my class are wandering around the hallway in pairs, arm in arm. The boys call me *żyrafa*, a ‘giraffe’ and throw wet balls of toilet paper at me.

I make sure to sit straight, to walk with my head up and to laugh in a girly way, but I soon realise that our teacher cares nothing about these things. Actually, when she asks questions it’s better to lower your head and avoid her eyes, and as for laughing, there’s not much to laugh about, at least not in the classroom. During the breaks the laughter is loud, but it is me who others are laughing at.

When the time comes to spell my name on the blackboard, I stand up and walk over briskly, ready to prove myself. I’ve been copying the prayers Grandfather taught me into my notebook and I no longer add extra lines to the letter E or confuse the direction S should be facing. But the moment I pick up the chalk, I freeze. I try to spell out my surname, but the letters perform a mocking dance, their choreography constantly changing, new letters joining their dance, uninvited, drunk. We’re made to stay in the classroom long after the bell announcing the break dies out. The teacher throws words at me and each one of them I fail to spell out right. I feel betrayed by my hands, by my tongue, by my head. My classmates giggle and whisper names they’ll be calling me from now on. The teacher hushes them.

‘There’s nothing to laugh about,’ she says. ‘It’s actually quite sad.’

My head feels heavy from holding back the tears. Eventually I’m told to return to my seat. The girl I share desk with moves to make space for me, further than it's needed.

I spend the first and every next break in the bathroom, biting my nails.

The dinners at school are awful, but they won’t let you off without making sure everything disappears from your plate. I see a girl cry as the teacher stands over her, pointing at the *kotlet* she couldn’t eat. I see another teacher put a boy in the corner for being allergic to milk. Soon I learn the tricks no teacher knows about. I learn to steal toilet paper from bathrooms and use it to wrap my food, then drop it in my backpack when nobody’s looking. Hot little parcels of guilt. My plate is always perfectly clean and I get praised for it often.

At four Grandfather picks me up and we walk back to his flat. He frees me off my backpack and asks questions I answer in made up stories of friendships I don’t have and events I watched from distance. No matter how much he nods and laughs I’m sure he catches every lie which comes out of my mouth. My stomach aches as I imagine how one day he’ll reveal them to my parents, or worse, to Ania, and how my parents will be

angry and how Ania will stop spending time with me realising everything I've ever told her was also untrue.

Sometimes Ania's there with him, waiting by the school fence, waving her hands and calling my name. On our way home she tells me about all the things she's been up to that day, and I listen to her with relief of not having to lie. She tells me about the kids she played with outside, how she drew a portrait of Grandfather, how she watered the plants. She helps Grandfather prepare the dinner every day now. She cuts things, slices the fat off pork chops, peels apples, cuts the bread in half. She knows where Grandfather keeps his medicines.

The number of times Grandfather calls me a ‘good girl’:

1. When I clean the dishes after dinner.
2. When I wipe my shoes the moment we come back from the playground.
3. When I bring him a glass of *kompot*.

Ania’s called a ‘good girl’ four times, one of them for nothing.

Ania's parents buy six new channels and we learn the daily programme for each one of them by heart. Channel five is our favourite one, where we can watch cartoons from different countries. Behind Polish dubbing, we hear Italian before we know it's called Italian. We also hear Portuguese, but faintly, as if someone was sending secret messages through the satellite. Russian cartoons are only shown in the evenings, during *Dobranocka*, the bedtime show for children. Every night - a different cartoon, and over the years the number of Soviet ones lowers. When *Niu, pogodi!* is broadcast for the last time, our parents watch it with us.

'Those were the times,' my *tata* says. Our parents hum and nod.

Mama makes milk *zupa* with cooked pasta, cold milk and salt. *Tata* makes pancakes with chocolate spread called Nutella which has recently appeared in the shops. Ania and I are obsessed with it, we scoop it out with our fingers and later are told off for finishing the whole jar in a single night. Auntie buys us our first box of cereal, the same as what we see in ads on channel five, between the shows we're glued to throughout the weekend. Auntie tips the cereal into our bowls, covers it with boiling water and we watch in delight as the chocolate shells melt within seconds, sweet sludge sticking to our spoons. We're certain this must be how cereal is served. We burn our tongues licking it off.

Uncle makes the best sandwiches in our family. He's always on the lookout for new flavours, bringing home a squishy papaya, a skull-hard coconut, and blue cheese which stinks up the whole fridge. We spend an evening marrying the cheese to other foods he's bought, dried figs, basil leaves, pickled pepper. He agrees to make us sandwiches with cheese and cereal. We drink the coconut milk from the hole he drills in the coconut.

Auntie refuses to try the cheese.

'Why would I eat food that smells like old socks?' she asks.

'It's a delicacy,' Uncle explains. 'They love it in France.'

Auntie chuckles and dismisses the conversation with a wave of the hand like Grandfather when he's done listening.

'They eat frogs in France,' she says.

'Ugh.' Ania frowns.

'I'd try a frog,' I say and Uncle nods approvingly.

Grandfather makes different *zupa* each day. My favourite one is with pickles, and Ania likes tomato with tiny pasta resembling snowflakes. We ask him what *Babcia's* signature dish was, and he gets upset when we can't remember.

'But we were too little. It was ages ago.'

'You don't remember *zacierka*?' He shakes his head.

'I do,' I say. Ania throws me an anxious look.

'Good girl,' Grandfather says.

Whenever she asks me how school was, I tell her that it was fine. I smile in that mysterious way I see girls in my class smile whenever they want their stories to be bigger than they actually are.

‘You know, we just hang out, do things, play outside.’

‘Like here?’

‘No, no, totally different.’

‘In what way?’

I sigh.

‘It’s hard to explain. You’d have to be there really.’

‘Please, try.’

I look up at the ceiling as if it was a starry sky then back at her.

‘It’s super fun.’

She enjoys these crumbs of my stories and I let her fill them with exciting details. Then one day as we’re sitting in our *mamas’* old bedroom, I notice Ania’s not listening to me.

‘What happened? Ania?’

Her chin trembles. She gazes down at her knees, her fists in a tight grip. She seems so small like she hasn’t grown at all.

‘I’m scared,’ she says. ‘I’m scared that when I go to school I won’t be as popular as you are. I’m scared that nobody’ll like me.’

Her voice breaks on the last syllable, and she starts sobbing. I sit up and move closer to her, then take her in my arms. My nostrils fill up with the tutti-frutti smell of the shampoo she’s used that morning.

‘It’s not true,’ I say feeling her heart beating faster. ‘Everybody will like you. You’ll see.’

‘How do you know?’

‘Because if they like me, they will like you too. We’re basically the same.’

She looks up at me with glistening eyes. She sniffs. Her nose is red and swollen. We smile at each other.

‘You’ll see.’

And I’m right. The following year when Ania goes to school, she becomes the most popular girl in her class.

The first secret I keep from her is the Milky Way bar Grandfather gives me.

By the time it happens, I'm fluent in forging all the good marks in my end-of-term report and I've learned how to make my plate look emptier at the school dinners, moving the leftovers to its edges, burying the meat in potato mash. I invent reasons to avoid P.E. classes. I repaint my family portrait over and over again, adding foreign ancestors and trips abroad, deaths of Grandparents I lost count of.

But I have never lied to Ania.

I take the Milky Way bar, but before it reaches my pocket, Grandfather stops me.

'You can have it now,' he says with a conspiratorial smile.

'But...' I start, hoping he will make a connection between my hesitation and my loyalty to Ania, but he reads it as a sign that I need more encouragement.

'You don't like chocolate anymore?' he asks.

I smile. My chest grows hot with guilt as I unwrap the bar, bring it to my mouth and take the first bite. I don't let the chocolate melt completely before I bite into it again. In less than a moment, the whole thing is gone.

'Just make sure you eat dinner.'

On our way from school, he asks about my day and I give him answers snipped of any details. He knits his eyebrows. He asks if I have any homework, but I can't remember so I make something up.

'You must be very tired,' he says. 'They exhaust you there, don't they?'

At home he tells me to sit down at the kitchen table while he serves me the biggest bowl of *zupa*, but I have no appetite. I stir the *zupa* for a long time, imagining the Milky Way bar swelling in my stomach.

'If you don't eat, you won't grow,' Grandfather's voice brings me back to the kitchen.

'Have the main, at least,' he says switching my bowl for a plate of *golqski*.

He's wrong then. I continue to grow. At the start of December, I'm the tallest student in my year.

Pod twoją obronę uciekamy się święta boża rodzicielko naszymi prośbami racz nie gardzić w potrzebach naszych ale od wszelakich złych przygód racz nas zawsze wybawiać panno chwalebna i błogosławiona o pani nasza orędowniczko nasza pośredniczko nasza pocieszycielko nasza z synem swoim nas pojednaj synowi swojemu nas polecaj swojemu synowi nas oddawaj.

Grandfather's counting *kotlety* I ate against the *kotlety* I used to eat, and I tell him it's ridiculous.

'Now I have dinners at school,' I say.

He measures me with his eyes, serious behind the reading glasses.

'What did you eat today?'

I sigh. We have this conversation every day now and every day I recite the dishes with the confidence of the cook who prepared them herself. I linger outside the dining hall and study the menu, only walk through the doors to leave my coupon on an empty table, hoping someone would find it and enjoy the second serving.

I hate myself for lying to Grandfather, but these lies protect me from sitting alone over the plate of food I find as disgusting as I find myself. For weeks now I've been worried there's something repulsive about me, something my peers and teachers pick up on before I even open my mouth. But I have no way of finding this out, so I start to avoid speaking, avoid others' eyes, avoid eating while in anyone's sight.

I survey the faces of my family members, but they're all absorbed in their own lives. In the evening I ask Ania if she's noticed anything different about me.

'Like what?' she doesn't lift her head from geography book. She's studying more than I do which shows in her marks. She'll finish the first year with distinction.

'You mean behaviour?' she asks.

'Anything.'

She frowns at me as if I was a tiny insect barely visible on the blade of grass.

'Maybe you're taller?' she says.

'Very funny.'

'Why do you ask?'

I shrug. It's Friday and I should put the school behind me, forget about it for the weekend, pretend I don't have to go back. Ania closes the book and throws her head back.

'I hate geography. Wanna play?'

It's Ania's turn to be the mother who runs an important company hiring women from all over the world and assigning them different jobs. I play every woman she interviews. My task is to persuade her I can do more than I seem to be able to do.

Ania pulls open the little door of the cabinet in *Mamas'* old bedroom and we breathe in the old wisdom from the yellow-paged books. We find notebooks signed with *Mamas'* names. We go through lines and lines of maths exercises, our hearts racing at the writing on the margins which reveals that our *mamas* were in love with Michael Jackson and they danced to Abba and Bonney M.

'I thought you couldn't listen to foreign music back then.'

'I think you could get some illegal tapes.'

'Illegal?'

I nod. I remind her of to the stories our parents told us of their teenage years, how Grandfather locked himself in the bathroom, ran water from the tap to mute *Radio Europa* while *Babcia* covered her ears and prayed for the family not to be caught. Ania's eyes widen.

We try to decipher conversations on the margins, but at times the writing thins into illegible swirls. After an hour we learn the movement of our *mamas'* hands, the way they rushed through words so not to be spotted by a teacher whose lesson they sacrificed to exchange opinions and gossip. But some words don't belong to either of them.

'Do you think it's some friends?'

'Or boyfriends.'

We chuckle. We often imagine *Mamas* holding hands of handsome boys, dancing at discos with them, but when we ask Grandfather for stories, he disappoints us with the clean version of their past, in which our *mamas* spend most of their days studying and no boy ever serenades them from outside. Although at times some event slips his tongue.

Like the time a boy was in love with both of them, and Grandfather showed him his place.

We gasp at the first page of the photo album I find. Our *mamas*, much older than us, wearing enormous glasses, their hair electrified with perms. When later we show them the photos they can't stop laughing.

'Those glasses were very fashionable back then,' *Mama* says wiping her eyes.

We ask *Tatas* if they have any photos from their past, but they shrug as if they didn't even care. A few days later Auntie presents us with a big, grey album, each page protected by white film.

'But don't take anything out,' she says.

For the first time we see the earliest photos taken of us. Sometimes Ania's *mama* is holding me in her arms while my *tata* is kissing Ania on the cheek.

We ask parents for stories from that period. They wave their hands as if we were mosquitos but then Uncle mentions something about how *Mama* went to Bulgaria to sell some fur coats so she could pay for my parents' wedding.

'I almost didn't come back!' *Mama* laughs.

'It was when *Babcia* went to America for the first time,' says Auntie and *Tata* pours everyone more vodka.

'You were born first, then you, we had a little *Syrenka*, which wouldn't start so to get your *mama* to the hospital we had to borrow Grandfather's *Maluch*.'

'Grandfather had a car?'

'What do you think? He drove everywhere in it!'

Uncle says Grandfather was terrified of roads and if it was legal, he'd drive on the pavement.

'When he drove,' *Tata* adds. 'Everyone had to be quiet.'

'Quiet!' Auntie croaks mocking Grandfather's tone. They laugh.

'If the journey took longer than forty minutes, he'd pull over and get out to take a break,' *Mama* hiccups.

'But he would never let us drive if he was there. We could borrow his car but he'd never be the passenger.'

'And *Babcia*? Did she drive?'

They exchange bemused looks.

'*Babcia*? No! No!'

'Even as a passenger she's unbearable.'

Then I remember. Our journey to the airport, *Babcia*'s hand clutching the handle of the car doors as if she was hoping to get out at the next traffic lights. I took it for the anxiety of leaving, but now I wonder if it was just the drive. All through the journey she was watching the road like she was able to telepathically control the car.

Both *Mamas* drive, but they do it rarely, it's our *tatas* who drive us everywhere. Sometimes *Mamas* complain that it makes them feel disabled, but other times they praise the comforts of passengers' life. Ania says she'll never get a driving licence.

'I will,' I say. 'Then I can drive us everywhere.'

'Or we get married and have personal drivers.'

'I don't want to get married.'

'Me neither!'

We laugh.

Auntie fixes her eyes on us.

‘What are you saying? Not getting married? You prefer to be old and lonely?’

This makes us laugh even harder.

‘Laugh like girls,’ *Mama* scolds us and we make bad impressions of a girlish laughter.

We ask our *mamas* if they’ve kept anything from the past: their diaries, clothes, wedding dresses? Did they keep the postcards they wrote to their friends? The badges from their scouts’ uniforms?

They shake their heads before we finish naming all the possible souvenirs.

‘But why not?’ we ask.

‘What would we keep them for?’

‘For us!’

‘Oh, girls, life isn’t like that.’

Later in bed, we make promises to each other never to throw anything away.

We sit by the table in the living room preparing ourselves for the next day of school. Ania's talking a lot. There's always something exciting happening in her class that she wants to share with me, but no matter how many times she mentions her friends' names or how precisely she describes all the games they play, I feel these stories just draw us apart.

Sometimes she wants to play and we play, but there's always a sense of something lingering and unfinished, and our made up stories no longer thrill us, we speak with voices monotonous and detached, or maybe it's just me and she's having fun, I can no longer tell what she feels like. The moment her parents appear at Grandfather's, she rushes to greet them. Her parents, always before mine, who at that point work seven days a week, sometimes until midnight.

Once she leaves, I stay up watching TV with Grandfather asleep in the armchair. I recite *Pod Twoj ą Obron ę* praying to Maryja to protect my parents, praying they're not too tired to drive home safely. Afterwards, I struggle to fall asleep, anxious about the following day. A black spot of fear growing inside me, a spot like one which appears on a tooth sometimes, a mere nothing until *Mama* touches it with a drill revealing a large hole it has been the whole time.

She wonders if she should spare the family the awkwardness of bringing it up. They're nice people, quiet, don't argue, do best. She has no contract with them and is aware that the only responsibility they have towards her is sewed with a thin thread of human decency.

She spends the night composing sentences in her head, sentences which would show her willingness to stay if they wanted her to, she's qualified to take care of the children, she has her own, two beautiful daughters and two granddaughters, beautiful and smart, they've just started school, are learning how to read and write and *Babcia* thinks of the letters and parcels she could send them now, but the thought breaks her heart.

She wonders if she'll ever see them then, curses her mind for allowing itself to blur with despair. She'll find another job, a good job, she'll earn money and return home.

She goes through the little notebook of English words she's written down, some of them no longer strangers. After hours of work she's holding a letter. She thanks the family for letting her help them and wishes them healthy and well.

In the morning the wife hands her an envelope. Inside there's money, *Babcia* knows it before she glimpses at it, this is how they always say goodbye. She prays there's enough to get her to the next place. Suddenly, the wife's English is as bad as *Babcia's*, she can't express herself at all. *Babcia* keeps saying it's alright, it's okay. She holds the wife's hand like her own daughter's and slips in the note into the wife's hand, which the wife reads with tears in her eyes.

The children stay in their room. They've already lost one Grandmother.

The husband offers to drive *Babcia* home, as if she had a home here, and for a moment she wonders if they know anything about her situation. They might think she lives in another town and maybe rents her flat while she's away, working. Or that she lives with her daughters, the two beautiful ones and the granddaughters, beautiful and smart. Or maybe, she laughs to herself, the husband's offering to drive her all the way to Poland. She would say yes to that. But she replies with an expression she's learned means 'no, thank you' even though it sounds like she's saying 'yes'.

'It's alright,' she smiles to him, the words glued to her mouth, the words guiding her through the morning all the way to the shop where she walks in to ask for directions. Absentminded, she counts the money outside the entrance, the envelope hidden in the bag, her fingers running through notes like a bank teller.

A sound in a distance she's never heard before, like a woman's screaming but a woman transforming into a beast.

Was it a fox?

But she's heard foxes before as a little girl, sometimes they came right outside their family house and her *tata*, our great-grandfather, told her not to worry, his soft singing calmed the foxes down. Maybe they came for his song? she then wondered.

The foxes came, then three years later came the War which had no interest in her *tata's* voice. And when he returned from Russia, he could no longer sing, his lungs barely letting go off air.

These aren't foxes but they must be their siblings. *Babcia's* eyes open wider, fill with tears from staring into the darkness. She locates the door at the end of the room in which other women sleep on the floor, younger and older than her. They came from different countries and some of them don't speak a word in English and *Babcia* worries about these ones the most. They talk to each other in lingering gazes and hand gestures as subtle as the flutter of a butterfly.

She lets her eyes close but then the howling starts again, and in the darkness she spots another woman, her eyes as wide as *Babcia's*, terrified eyes, knowing no escape, praying eyes, eyes who beg God to save her.

The night before it was hunger itself which kept them all awake, nudging them each time they passed out of exhaustion. And now, the hunger of others, the beast outside their door. *Babcia* measures the distance of the sound like when in the storm she counts the seconds between the flash and the thunder's growling, but there's no light to follow, only the echoing howling of the beast.

She dreads the nights for the time they give her to think, and now as the women shift in their beds she wonders which ones will survive? Will it be her?

She's small, she can slip into the cabinet where they keep their clothes, then sneak out as the beasts devour the others. She measures the distance to the cabinet. Will she fight them to survive?

She starts talking to God, first quietly but soon she lets the sound of her voice raise until she's sure it can reach Him.

Some women get up and now they sit still on the edges of their beds, their bodies dispelling the thick darkness. They're ready, if the howling grows any louder they'll run and *Babcia*, too thinks about running, the last time she's run she was a little girl, she ran to the forest, her hand holding her sister's hand, then empty.

They're surrounded now like she was during the War. She hid with her *mama* in the sacred cave in Majewo, where the village women built an altar for *Świętej Maryji Częstochowskiej* after Maryja cured an incurable child, and later cured Uncle Janek from alcoholism, and Great-Uncle Staś' eyes. She stood there between *Mamas'* arms, too tall to be carried and yet that's what her *mama*, our great-grandmother did, held her so high that *Babcia's* eyes were even with those of soldiers' who waited outside with *Katyusha Armata*. If they want to shoot children, let them remember their faces, her *mama* later said. There were other women in the cave with them, women who were lost after the War, some died, some moved, and others remained forever missing. They sang their prayers as Russian soldiers positioned the *armata*.

Babcia never tells us what happened only that *Święta Maryja* saved them again.

And here she is now. This is the only time she wonders if the money was worth it. Not because she might die, but because she'll be eaten alive along with other women, whose passports were removed and kept to secure their contracts. So *Babcia* knows she won't ever be identified, bones look the same no matter where you're from.

The howling stops but the following night she goes to bed in her clothes, waits two hours after the lights go off. She prays.

She gets up, scans the room, can't see any open eyes, so she slips out of her bed and on her toes with her bag lifted over the ground, she creeps towards the door. She pushes the handle down and is about to force the doors open when she hears someone move behind her.

It's Alina, a young woman from Russia who wanted to get to Canada but was stopped at the border. *Babcia* heard Alina was approached by an older man who pretended to have recognised her, and she clutched her fists and kept her mouth shut stopping herself from screaming, because she's heard those stories before, although nobody tells you what it feels like when you're no longer the story's reader but its main character. At that point you can't stop yourself from making a mistake, every road will lead you astray, the only thing to do is pray to survive it.

She sees Alina's big eyes staring at her in the darkness, growing larger until *Babcia's* mouth opens, but she manages to stop herself from letting the words escape. What would she do with Alina? And if they found them both, would it make it better or worse? She can't risk learning the answer, so she nods at Alina, turns towards the door and presses the handle open.

We don't find out how she's left only that she had to walk by the highway, five lines wide, in the midst of the night. Trucks from every state she's been to drove past her while she trudged on in a haze, thanking God she's survived.

But how?

Babcia doesn't tell us and when we ask our parents, they shake their heads, too.

Easter comes, but there's no letter. Usually she sends us wishes, calls. We anxiously consume the Sunday breakfast, passing the dishes between each other in quick movements, ready to run to the phone.

A week passes. No call. No letter. *Tata* goes to the Post Office to ask if there were any problems, but everything's fine.

We wait.

When she finally calls three months later, she sounds no different than ever. Tired and busy.

'*Halo*,' I say to the phone. I'm third in line, after *Mama*, before Ania. The two of them along with Auntie gather around me like I'm about to read out the name of a lottery winner.

'My Kasia!' *Babcia* says. 'How are you, child?

'*Babciu!*' my heart skips. The words rush to my mouth all at once, but when I open it to speak, they remain inside as if startled by the blinding attention I'm suddenly granted.

'How is school, Kasiu?' she says. 'I heard you're reading so well, that you're studying a lot. Maybe next time you can read me a poem you've learned?

I lower my head. I wonder what else my parents told *Babcia*. Whenever they mention my name on the phone, I focus all the attention on distracting Ania, in case they tell *Babcia* about my real time at school.

'...you have to take care of her like your *mama* used to take care of hers,' I hear *Babcia's* voice. I blink.

'Yes...' I say unsure what I'm agreeing with. Ania pulls the sleeve of my jumper. I glance at her. My turn, she mouths. I frown and straighten up.

'How is America, *Babciu*? Where are you now?'

'Is Ania there with you? Oh, America, haha. Yes, *kochanie*, America's very great.'

'Me, me!' Ania hops pulling harder at my sleeve. Her *mama* touches the receiver.

'Let her talk,' she whispers. I turn to *Mama*, but she responds with an apologetic smile. I sigh.

'*Babciu*, I have to go now. I'll give you Ania.'

'Oh, *alright*, child. Take care, Kasiu and remember, pray to God, because God always listens.'

I will, *Babciu*,' I say. 'Bye.'

I pass the phone to Ania and walk towards the bathroom.

‘Last week Grandfather taught me how to turn pancakes!’ I hear her laughter as I close the door. ‘And he said next week he’ll teach me how to read time!’

We always leave home early, but more and more often I arrive at school last. On our way there, my parents have to stop for different things like petrol, or materials for the dentistry. Sometimes it takes *Mama* an hour to choose everything she needs and by that time the class has already started, and my stomach turns upside down knowing that the teacher will make me answer at the blackboard. I'm never prepared. At home I try to forget about school but eventually I have to do the homework, and I panic realising I have no idea what we did in the class. I have no courage to ask my parents for help. They're always tired these days.

Ania isn't doing well either. She spends every Sunday leaning over her history book, while Auntie taunts her with names and dates. I'm in the same room, often reading one of her books. Ania reads little herself, she prefers instead to listen to the stories recorded on tapes.

'This is why you can't spell,' Auntie scolds her. 'And look at your handwriting, you can't read anything it says.'

'My *mama*'s a monster,' Ania tells me later in bed, after my parents call hers again to ask if I could stay over. 'And she always shows off how she didn't care at school and complains how Grandfather was too tough on her.'

'My *mama* doesn't care,' I say. 'I don't think if they even know which class I'm in.'

'You're lucky,' she says turning over.

Long after she's fallen asleep I stay awake, counting the stars Ania's stuck to the ceiling arranging them into constellations, the sky which only exists for the two of us.

I beg *Mama* to let me stay home. It's the third night in a row that my stomach aches. She says don't be a child, and I tell her that's who I am. She says, we'll be late.

‘But if Ania had a stomach ache she'd be allowed to stay in.’

‘And if Ania jumped off the cliff, would you jump after her?’

On our way to school I keep thinking about it. I don't understand why it's even a question.

We spend the summer at Grandparents' allotment, saving potatoes from beetles, gorging on earth-sweetened carrots, and teaching frogs how to swim in a barrel.

It takes us twenty minutes drive to get there, but it feels much further, as if the allotment existed outside the timeline obeyed by the rest of the world. Here, days don't end, but expand into nights which are just as lively, as if darkness was simply another shade of light.

Every day we run around wildly, our mouths wide open, our eyes even wider. There's always something to do here, Grandfather makes sure to give us new tasks each day and we feel ourselves maturing, becoming more engaged with the land, with the earth. We no longer kill insects, even the ugly ones, because they're as busy doing their jobs as we are with ours.

We play pretend, a husband and wife, with a Little Mermaid ring *Babcia* sent us. I'm always the husband, proposing to Ania every day. Grandfather gives us his blessing and we walk around for hours holding hands, because this is what the newly married couples do, they hold hands, then the woman has a baby. But we don't have the doll to play the baby's part, so instead every day I propose to her again.

School's a chapter from another book, one we've closed and put to the side carelessly ignoring the page we were on. But on some mornings, I'm struck with anxiety of the recent past. My hands mechanically seek for my mouth and before I know it, all my nails are gone. Ania complains whenever she catches me. She hates the sound.

Everybody tells me it's a disgusting habit, so more and more often I try doing it in secret, but they can always tell that I've done it. They use different methods to make me quit. Grandfather slaps me on a hand whenever he sees me lift it to my mouth while Ania casts me a glare and if I continue, she leaves the room and only comes back if I promise to stop.

'It's the sound,' she says. 'I can't take it.'

It's *Mama* who most often calls it disgusting.

'Look at you,' she says. 'And you're wondering why you don't have any friends. You put dirty hands in your mouth. You'll have worms in your stomach.'

Tata bites his nails too but acts like he doesn't.

'Do you have to do this?' he asks.

I do. Sometimes I find myself holding my arm as if trying to stop my hand from reaching my mouth. Other times I only realise I've been biting my nails when Ania gets up to leave the room. I scratch my nails underneath the table hoping no-one will notice. But scratching's never enough and sooner or later I go back to biting, unable to stop.

There are days I wonder if I have worms. My stomach hurts so badly I can't sleep. At school I spend most breaks in the bathroom, arriving late to every lesson, pale and trembling. When a boy from my class sees me biting my nails, he twists his face in an ugly grimace while putting his fingers in his mouth. His friend laughs and after the break, everyone makes this impression of me, a monkey. I never look up from my desk, which the teacher spots.

'And what are you hiding there for?' she says. 'Come to the blackboard, we'll see what you know.'

I stand up slowly, my eyes fixed on the floor. Of course I know nothing and she gives me a bad mark.

There are other things Ania and I believe in.

If you swallow a chewing gum, it'll get stuck to the walls of your stomach and unable to eat anything, you'll die.

If you swallow a watermelon or a pumpkin pip, it'll grow into a full-size fruit.

If you jump on Grandparents' bed, a tarantula will come out from underneath it, and tarantulas are smart animals, you won't be able to escape it, it'll follow you around until it bites you. Ania's terrified of all the things we've heard, but I want to test them on my own skin. When Ania and Grandfather are in the kitchen, I lift the curtain which divides the living room and Grandparents' bedroom and kneel in front of the bed to peek underneath it. In the naked darkness my eyes play tricks on me and I draw back certain I saw a quick movement.

Another time from the balcony of my parents' flat, I throw a snail, then run four floors down and out onto the playground to see if it's landed safely. I search for it for a long time stepping on other snails, but I never find the one I've dropped. I want to repeat the experiment, but Ania doesn't let me. She says she'll tell her parents that I'm a psychopath.

Then one day when Ania's in the bathroom I pick up a Polly Pocket, her favourite doll which she got from her parents after my *mama* fixed her teeth. I've never gotten a gift from anyone for having my teeth done. *Mama* says good teeth are enough of a reward.

I hide the doll in my tights and keep it there until twenty minutes later when my parents arrive. When we get out of the car outside our block of flats, I jog to the closest bin and throw the doll into it.

'What was that?' *Mama* asks.

'Nothing. Some rubbish I found.'

I'm kept awake by the guilt all night. What's happened to me? Am I growing evil? I try to fend off the images of Ania searching for Polly Pocket in panic. I promise to never do anything bad if she doesn't find out that it was me who's done it. I pray to my Guardian Angel, to Maryja, to God, I recite the same prayer fifteen times, but the guilt only grows louder. I bite my nails until my fingers bleed. I bite into the skin of my arm as hard as I can.

Ania cries for days and Auntie asks five times if I've seen the doll anywhere. Ania must know, I think but I keep to my story.

'The last time I saw her,' I say. 'Was when Ania was playing with it. She must have put it somewhere.'

Auntie suggests she buys her another doll, but Ania refuses. Instead, she gets a fish. And so do I.

At the pet store, I gaze through the glass of every aquarium, but after half an hour I'm still not sure which one I like. *Tata*'s getting impatient. He's looking around, keeps glancing at his watch. I tell myself, come on, just pick anything, but the moment I decide, a different fish grabs my attention. Eventually *Mama* chooses for me. The fish we get is red and has a long tail which sways in the water like a flag of surrender.

On our way home I'm holding a balloon filled with water and the fish inside.

'It's a *bojownik* fish,' *Tata* explains later, tapping the glass of the aquarium. 'It fights other fish, so it has to live alone.'

All night the fish swims in feverish circles as if reading itself for a boxing game.

I can still see the way it whitens as it rises to the surface of the water, belly swelled up like a balloon. The flush of water in the toilet bowl as it travels, *Mama* promises, to the core of the sea. The next day I feel guilty when in the pet shop my parents buy me another one. Like Ania who refuses a new doll, I want to think my fish is too special to ever be replaced. But once we release the new fish into the aquarium I'm skipping with excitement again, taking it out of the water, stroking its head, and placing it on the carpet to see how high it can jump.

We do the same with Ania's fish, but when Auntie sees us teaching Eric the Free Willy jump, she moves the aquarium to the living room. Soon, Uncle takes it over completely, nurturing the whole range of fantastic and weird fish. More than once we catch him selling the video tapes of films Ania and I love, to purchase another specialist tool for the aquarium that is now the size of the TV.

'Move on,' our parents say when we cry after yet another fish is killed by our curiosity. 'We'll just get another one.'

And so, eventually we do move on.

Tata admires Uncle's aquarium and *Mama* asks him if he wants one too, but he shakes his head, come on. My parents don't have time to take care of anything more right now.

It's a rare occurrence that they visit Ania's parents on a Saturday night and Ania and I are careful not to do anything that could change their mind. We're in the living room with them, somewhat unnoticed. They're busy laughing at Grandfather's kitchen arrangements, a nosy neighbour from Ania's block of flat, and tv shows on the new tv channels. They're really enjoying themselves. My *tata* picks the guitar and plays the first chords of *Hotel California*. Auntie starts singing, then *Mama* joins her for the chorus. Uncle hums, smiling to himself with content. He lights a cigarette and squints his eyes inhaling and as he exhales, I breathe in the smoke. I like its coolness, its wooden smell. Auntie says that when she was pregnant with Ania she loved the cigarette smoke.

'Seriously, like a psycho I followed people around on the streets just to breathe it in.'

'You're joking!' *Mama* laughs so hard she's crying.

'And you weren't better. She had such a craving for beer, isn't it true, Janusz?'

Tata nods his head in trance of his music.

'So, we were both like bums,' Auntie says. 'I'm surprised our children are okay.'

'Are they?' Uncle asks and we burst out laughing.

We want to hear more stories from their youth, but we don't want to draw attention to ourselves in case they realise what time it is and send us to bed. Time passes too quickly since we started school.

When *Tata* plays *Imagine* everyone joins in even though no one knows the lyrics well. So we imagine there's no countries over and over again.

At night we lie together in my bed, facing each other creating the space which only contains the two of us and nothing else. I tell her about my family and the things I've overheard *Mama* say to *Tata* in one of many arguments they've had after work this week.

'My grandmother,' I start in a voice ready to reveal a secret. 'Was the most beautiful girl in the village.'

I wait a moment for her reaction. Her eyes are shining in the light of the moon which glimpses through the window as if he too wanted to hear the story I will tell.

'Everyone wanted to marry her. She would walk down the road to the music of whistles of men, and cries of envious wives dragging their men back into their houses. Her father, my great-grandfather, didn't want her to go out, but when her mother, my great-grandmother, died, there was no-one else to take care of the house and the small farm he owned. He asked her to cover her head with her mother's shawl and wear clothes her mother wore, old and oversized, but even this could not disguise her beauty.'

'Her father, my great-grandfather, drank a lot but never had enough money to drink as much as he wanted. After his wife died, his drinking got worse. He took loans in the shop and loans from his neighbours, loans he knew he would never repay.'

'Then one day my grandfather appeared at his doorstep, a man thirteen years older than my great-grandfather's daughter. He brought with him a bottle of vodka and said he came to propose. The same day my grandmother was packed and leaving the house she's lived her whole life in to move to another house, the house at the end of the village which my grandfather built two years earlier. They said when my great-grandfather sobered up the following day, he cursed his wife for giving birth to such a beautiful girl.'

'What?' Ania cries out. 'For a bottle of vodka?'

'Shhh!' I cover her mouth with my hand. I listen out to make sure my parents haven't woken up. We go to bed much later than they do, often long after midnight and usually they don't say anything, but if we're too loud, *Mama* comes in and threatens she'd separate us for good. This is how one time Ania ended up sleeping alone on the sofa in the living room. She couldn't close her eyes for more than a second without falling into fits of panic, turning all shadows into terrible shapes. A spider leg or a giant hand ready to grab her any time. For the next two weeks she refused to stay over at mine, and it was impossible to persuade *Mama* to let me sleep at Ania's two weekends in a row.

'But one bottle?' she whispers when I drop my hand.

‘I guess he was poor and mad from his drinking. I don’t know much about them anyway.’

‘That’s crazy,’ she says.

‘She had four children, three sons and a daughter.’

‘What happened to them?’

I turn onto my back and gaze up at the ceiling.

‘I don’t know. I think they all spread to different places. There’s an uncle in the south and *Tata* is here. The older brother, I don’t know.’

Every so often a wave of light sweeps across the ceiling as a single car drives by on the otherwise deserted road.

‘Their daughter, my *tata*’s sister. She killed herself,’ I announce.

With the corner of my eye, I can see her eyes widen in shock. Neither of us have ever known of anyone who’s done something like that. Suicide has always been a result of an unbearable fame, another performance act by a celebrity at the peak of their career. But I know it is true. I’ve heard parents discuss it in half-sentences and quiet voices unusual for them.

‘What happened?’ says Ania. I close my eyes. When I open them, the ceiling alights a moment before the room grows dark again.

‘She had one son, taken from her at birth.’

‘Stolen?’

‘It was something she agreed to do. She wasn’t married and if you got pregnant and weren’t married you could get kicked out, from home, from the village. After she gave birth, she stayed with her parents. During the day she did all the chores, milked the cows and helped at the field. But each night she lay in bed paralysed with terror. The baby she gave away visited her.’

‘They noticed she grew frustrated and wild. She yelled at the cows and struck grass with a stick as if defending herself from some ghostly presence. Her parents didn’t say anything and after a while they let her stay home thinking she was sick like many girls her age after giving birth.’

‘She disappeared for a week, then they found her again, at the bus stop in another village. She didn’t say anything and seemed oblivious to the presence of people around her. She was taken home and declared mad.’

‘She could no longer see the faces of the living, but instead was visited by dead babies, who other girls in the village abandoned after giving birth, thinking their babies

would end up in orphanages or foster families. But the nuns who took them drowned the babies in the local river. So one day my auntie went to the river to beg forgiveness from her dead baby. She stepped into the water and the voice encouraged her to keep going, and she walked deeper and deeper until her whole body disappeared in the lake.'

'And what happened then?'

'What do you mean?' I turn to look at Ania. Her face is pale and her mouth open. 'She died.'

'But did they find her?'

I think for a while.

'I guess... I have no idea what happened afterwards. But she didn't have a funeral. They don't bury people who commit suicide.'

I don't say anything more and neither does she. I'm not sure how long she stays awake but at some point the street goes completely quiet. Not one car drives by until the morning arrives.

At Milwaukee bus station she buys an apple. It's the first meal she's had in fifteen hours. She sits on the bench and turns the apple in her hands as if making a wish. A woman sits on the opposite end of the bench and devours the fruit with her eyes. *Babcia* can see her in the corner of her vision, can see how hungry the woman is. In her head she counts the money she has left. Her head has become a calculator since she's left Indiana, numbly processing numbers. She tells herself it has to be enough and turns to the woman to offer her the apple, but the woman's gone and it takes *Babcia* a few seconds to spot her going behind the station, into the bathroom with a man, who wears cowboy boots, whose hair's greasy, his face unshaved.

Babcia drops the apple into her bag and fixes her gaze on the bus lanes ahead. There's a constant exchange of people, some get off to make space for others. She sees a young couple with a large backpack each, boarding the bus whose sign promises to take them across the country. Old people sit on the benches like hers, as if waiting for someone to pick them up.

She disappears into stories of others and realises that for the first time she feels safe. She could stay at the bus station living off apples. What else does she need?

The wind carries words which pass her like memories. She can catch them in her ears, hear closer, hear every syllable, then release them back into the air.

Later when I'll ask her to confirm the stories I've gathered from the phone calls and the letters she sent us, she'll pause and her eyes will travel to the wall, to the portrait of John Paul II.

'I've always managed,' she'll say. 'It was hard, but I've always managed somehow.'

I enter the living room and find Grandfather sitting in his armchair, his eyes closed.

‘Grandfather.’

I startle him.

‘*Ciiii*, child, don’t you see Grandfather’s resting?’

The next time I wait for Ania to walk in first. I don’t tell anyone what I’m thinking about, not to her, not to my parents. Nothing’s changed and yet suddenly it’s as if the countdown has started, one only I can see.

Everyone acts as if it isn’t there, as if it isn’t going to happen. And it won’t, not to all of us at once, for some reason I’m sure of this. There are other things I’m sure of as well, so I put together a list in my head, a little god’s plan.

How Does Death Work?

1. If one of us dies, it'll be some time before another person does unless it's an old person like Grandfather or *Babcia*.
2. If my parents die, I will move in with Ania.
3. If my parents die, it'll be either because of their lack of attention or somebody else's fault. Every time we're about to get into the car I ask them if we can walk instead. Don't be silly, they say, we don't have time for that. Every time we get into the car, I keep my eyes on the road. If they start talking, I immediately take over, distracting *Mama* so *Tata* can focus solely on driving. But arriving at the destination doesn't bring any relief, just a hopeless extension or worse, it seems like a part of the plan.
4. If Ania dies, I will not survive.
5. If I pray for my family's health, they will be protected for one more day.

At night I pray. I give names to God. If I don't remember what someone's called, I describe them to Him the best way I can. The neighbourhood kid with rabbit teeth, the fat butcher with swollen calves, the handsome priest from our local church. I pray for a long time and yet every morning I wake up in panic of forgetting someone. So I pray in the morning too, for *Babcia*, and *Mama*, and *Tata*, and Ania and her parents, and Grandfather, and *Babcia*, and the neighbourhood kid with rabbit teeth, and the fat butcher with swollen calves, and the handsome priest from our local church, and Grandfather, and Grandfather please, oh God please, don't kill Grandfather.

For a while now I've been thinking of death every day. It's like a constant tremble inside me. Often at night I find myself struggling to sleep, envisioning my parents not waking up, Grandparents collapsing in heart attacks, and Ania's body twisted in unnerving way, ran over by a car.

If I tell *Mama* I'm scared of Grandfather dying, she tells me bluntly that everyone dies.

When on the last day of school before the Christmas break, the priest opens the Bible on the last pages and starts reciting the text, I realise there's something else coming, much worse than death of my family and friends. It's the first time I envision The End of the World.

One day Jesus will return to earth and save us all, dead and alive. Those who've been dead will now live in Heaven, forever, and those who are still alive will join him as well. It's a gift from God, the priest tells us. We will all be saved.

I can't stop thinking how in order to be saved those who live will have to die. How will it happen? Will it be painful? What if Ania and I are away from one another? What if I don't ever see her again?

I listen to the priest intently as my hands are writing down every word he says. I try to figure out the prophetic details, something which can reveal when the Apocalypse comes.

Others are not afraid at all. They make jokes and interrupt the reading to ask about the details which do not matter, like the historical tyrants and what will happen to them. It doesn't make sense that Hitler gets saved. It doesn't make sense that our grandparents will share the space with Stalin.

'God is mysterious in his actions,' the priest says. 'We have to follow His word without any questions.'

'Is there anything to prevent this from happening?' I ask. The priest gives me the look of someone who's been asked the same question every day of his life.

'Why would you want to prevent it?' his eyes scan the room slowly. 'We will all be saved.'

We are afraid of worms, but only when they're in our dreams. Mad people dream about worms. Ania's afraid of madness more than she is of death.

'Imagine that you can't remember who you are. Or that you can't stop laughing at something nobody laughs about.'

'Or imagine,' she says. 'No.' She stops herself before the next word's uttered. Better not croak it out.

Every night I pray to the Guardian Angel. I ask him for good dreams, but moments later when I close my eyes, I can see the worms, curly and small, crawling up the walls and hiding under pillows.

I open my eyes to imagine Jesus.

Jesus is on the cross and the cross is burning. As I let myself be hypnotised by the wood turning black, I close my eyes and for a long time my mind is a vibrating white light.

I can't stop myself. I think about them. I see them.

I open my eyes.

There are whole nights I spend waiting for the dawn. In the morning when she asks, I tell Ania I can't remember the dreams I've had.

There are teeth dreams, too. If you lose your teeth in a dream, someone you know will die.

I don't lose my teeth in dreams, but one day Uncle Staś dies in his sleep. I wonder if it were his teeth that fell out.

We play pretend. She pretends she's a wife of a rich businessman who works abroad and is never home. I pretend I'm a neighbour who's moved next door. I'm alone and she shows me around. Under the duvet our feet move as we pretend we're walking around town.

Ania describes the places we pretend to pass.

'Here's the cinema where we first met,' she says. 'And here's the restaurant where he proposed.'

I ask her what it's like to be married and she sighs.

'It's impossible!' she sighs again. She grasps my hand and we pretend to walk back to her beautiful home.

'Tomorrow I'll help you pick the furniture for the living room,' she promises, kissing me on the cheek. Her face is hot against my cold skin.

We play pretend. The husband didn't come back. Ania's caught him with another woman and decided to divorce him.

'He was not good,' she says pretending to wipe tears off her eyes.

'I'm so sorry,' I say hugging her again and again as she reveals more details about their horrible affair.

Later we lie in bed staring at the ceiling.

'Do you think our parents ever cheated on each other?' Ania whispers.

'I think we would know.'

'How?'

'I don't know, but I think we'd be able to tell.'

Ania turns to face me. I stare at her to avoid staring into the darkness which enveloped the room.

'Do you think if I did something bad you could tell?'

Her eyes water as she keeps them wide open. I smile. It's one of the things we've heard, when a person lies, she blinks.

'Like what?'

'I don't know. Like if I talked behind your back.'

'Do you?' I grin seeing her struggle not to blink.

'No...'

'Then why would you ask?'

She closes her eyes. We laugh.

'I think I'd be able to tell if you did something.'

'You wouldn't because I'd never do anything...'

'Impossible. Everyone does something wrong...'

'But not to you.'

She nods like it's fair.

'I think it's easy not to hurt someone you care about. I mean, you can upset them but to hurt them is a different thing.'

'Me too, but I don't know, I worry things will change. You know how our *mamas*...'

'Our *mamas* were never like us.'

'How do you know?'

'I can just tell.'

We smile at each other. The darkness softens into a cocoon we fall asleep in.

We disappear into the stories of rich people entwined in bad relationships, of siblings who possess magical powers, of girls like us, who live in different countries and speak languages soft like cotton candy. We disappear into the stories for hours, and when eventually our parents call for us to get ready to leave, it's like being shaken awake from the most perfect dream and for a while we move in haze, unsure what roles we're supposed to play.

We spend Ania's birthday behind the closed doors of *Mamas'* old bedroom. We sit on the carpet with bags of crisps and sweets spread across a blanket, a picnic indoors. We promise Grandfather that we'll tidy up afterwards, he won't find a crumb on the floor. He buys us Piccolo, a peach flavoured mock champagne. It tastes like soda but the shape of the bottle, its long neck and defined waist, makes us feel drunk.

We talk about our dream birthdays.

'America,' Ania announces.

'I'd love to go on a road trip. Like in the movies,' she pauses. She closes her eyes, and I'm already there with her, behind the wheel of our car, the radio turned up so high the music surfs in the wind. I can't hear her through the lyrics of the songs we know by heart, but the lyrics of the songs speak more honestly than any words we've ever spoken. As we cross the vastness of the desert, the blue sky caresses our hair. Ania stands up, lifts her arms and screams like they do in films. They can already hear us in the next state before we arrive.

Ania smiles. The breeze enters through the window slightly ajar. I inhale it and for a moment my nostrils fill with heat. I blush, suddenly struck by the desire to touch her cheek, to run my fingers across the land of her skin. To kiss her, I think, and my face burns.

I reach for a pack of crisps the moment Ania decides to do the same and our hands catch each other. She chuckles and I relax my fingers letting go off hers.

'I love these so much,' she says between the crunches. Something changes and I'm relieved to discover the desire's gone, but for the rest of the day my body is tense and I can't breathe fully as if I've emerged from the freezing sea.

‘Remember how *Babcia* used to whisper stories into our ears whenever we stayed over at Grandparents’?’ Ania asks me one Friday night.

It's been four years since we last saw *Babcia*, years of recovering memories which by now seem to come from someone else's life. Years of ownerless words and gestures which linger over our Sunday dinners, years of phone calls and letters, of packages filled with wonders.

Often when *Babcia* calls, I find myself in the bathroom biting my nails, missing out on the whole conversation. I don't want to report from another day at school, to tell her everything's great when it isn't, when in reality, every morning before the school starts I pretend my stomach hurts, hoping *Mama* 'll let me stay behind, spare me the humiliation of loneliness, the shame of lameness, the creeping feeling that it'll always be like that.

‘I don't think it happened,’ I say. Ania's face darkens.

‘What?’

‘I don't think she used to tell us stories.’

‘Then who did?’

‘Grandfather? Nobody?’

She turns around in bed, facing away.

‘You just forgot,’ she says and a few minutes later her breathing grows heavier, but I can tell she isn't really sleeping. Still, I do nothing but turn around to face the wall.

When I wake up, she's already in the living room with her parents, watching TV.

We hear foreign words.

German like sweets and coffee machines.

Italian like cooking sauces.

English like *Babcia*.

In his sleep, Grandfather curses in Russian. He says a Soviet soldier must have possessed him.

‘They walk around, *swolocze*, looking for new souls to rent. The only way to get rid off them is to pray.’

So we pray, with him and for him, but the Soviet soldier stays.

‘Maybe he isn’t so bad anyway, if he’s only coming out at night,’ Grandfather says.

Ania’s afraid of the Russian soldier. She reminds me of a story of Grandfather’s sister who went mad.

‘Do you think that’s how it happens?’ she asks when we lie in bed at night so close to each other her breath warms my face. I blink slowly and smile.

‘I like him,’ I say. ‘When you speak another language, it’s as if you lived two different lives.’

‘But then what makes you *you*?’

I move closer to her. Her eyes are shining like two beads on the necklace *Mama* wore to the opening of the dentistry, even though we were the only ones who came.

‘Do you think you’d be the same if you spoke another language?’

I can hear the intonation. The way words rise then fall like dawn and dusk in a single monologue. I can hear where one word finishes and another one starts. It's the pauses I learn first, the air between the breaths, then words.

I can soon predict if the sentence will reach the end.

Then single words.

Short ones which appear often.

I like to hear the same word many times, although it can be confusing, I might know most of the words in a sentence but when put together they fail to make sense, as if mocking my attempt to translate them.

Sometimes an English word sounds like a twin to Polish, and I laugh at this linguistic banality as if I've been deceived by the simplest of tricks. I learn these words the quickest, even if I don't entirely understand what they mean. And then there are untranslatable words. The first time I hear them I don't realise they're words at all. In-between syllables, intervals between the show.

When *Babcia* calls, my heart skips like in the first year of her absence and I rush to the phone to ask her what everything means. She laughs brightly as if relieved for someone to acknowledge what she finds strange herself.

'It's another language, Kasiu,' she explains. 'People here say things we won't understand.'

Her humble acceptance motivates me deeper to seek out the answers, now for the both of us. In the school's library I find a pocket dictionary. I'm not allowed to borrow it, the school has only one copy, and teachers use it a lot. But I can study it as much as I want as long as it stays inside, so every break now if I'm not in the bathroom, I go the library the size of our living room, walk to the desk and in the nicest voice I can muster I ask the librarian if I can borrow it.

'Don't bend any pages,' the librarian hands me the book. I hold it like an egg ready to hatch. I nod eagerly to thank her, respecting the required silence.

I try not to run to the only desk we have. It's always empty but breaks are short and in five minutes I copy no more than ten words. I write definitions and try to understand where in a sentence a specific word can be used. I learn that some words have hundreds of meaning so next time our parents listen to Eric Clapton or the Beatles, I dance with different translations changing the songs' lyrics. Get up, get in, get on with it. Let go, Let in, Let it be.

As the music gets louder, Ania and I sing along making up words which we believe sound like English. But sometimes, the tight braid of syllables untie itself into a streak of recognisable words. It's like walking past a person you've seen somewhere before, you can't tell where, but you recognise her face.

We dance on the bed, bouncing to the rhythm of the music and singing to deodorants when I hear the words I know.

'This means *hold me!* This means *pray!*' I shout and when the second chorus arrives, we sing the words with new confidence. The bed is no longer a bed but a stage, and our toys are the audience we're performing for. We yell the English words to the real microphones and the music grows louder even though our parents don't turn the radio up.

Polish is boring. It's like eating *zupa grochowa* every single day.

I tell Ania what the world sounds like in English, how even animals don't communicate like they do in Poland.

'I wonder if they understand each other when they come from two different countries,' she says. We're on the playground outside Grandfather's house, sitting on a bench like he used to. We're watching two small girls pushing the swings to the limits of their heights, and two pigeons dodging their legs to pick at breadcrumbs.

'They say that dogs have accents like we do. An English and American dog won't bark the same.'

'That's crazy! What about cats?'

'I bet cats understand everyone...I wish I had a cat...'

Parents wouldn't allow us any pets. When Ania asks her *Mama* if they can get a dog, Auntie throws her hands in the air.

'Not a chance!' she exclaims. 'Why would I want to clean someone else's shit?'

We giggle with excitement when we hear her swear. Sometimes we challenge each other to say the most horrendous word we can think of, and with each game, we gain more confidence exploring our bad mouths. The words that shock us most relate to genitals, while biological functions make us laugh. Ania's the first one to use *kutas* to describe a boy in her class, the word captures perfectly his playful arrogance and unnecessary meanness. We agree that *cipka*, the word for girls' parts sounds disgusting.

'There's something soft and sticky about it,' Ania says, so we make an agreement to never use it again, but I'm sure that like me she thinks about it every time she pees.

At the library I search for swear words. I build the walls with my shoulders and elbows so that nobody can see what I'm looking for. But the dictionary remains innocent and oblivious when confronted with my questions and I leave the library soaked in shame.

Later, at Religion, the priest tells us about the sins, how thinking about something is as bad as doing it.

'God created beautiful language which Satan stained with swear words.'

When I tell Ania what I've heard, she confirms her Religion teacher told them the same thing. We decide to approach Grandfather about it.

'Girls shouldn't curse,' he explains, but doesn't say anything about God and with relief, we continue to challenge each other, discovering that all the fun lies outside of what girls are supposed to be like according to Grandfather, parents' and teachers.

‘When I grow up, I’ll leave and forget how to speak it entirely.’

Grandfather turns the TV off. The news has just finished but it seems like he did it in response to my statement. I stand next to the armchair with my arms crossed, like a hero ready to change the world. I’m proud of my decision. Everything makes sense. I want to tell Grandfather about the school, about how I hate going there, how nobody wants to make friends with me but now I see why - I wasn’t supposed to be born here.

‘What are you saying, Kasiu?’ His face shows confusion as if I’ve been speaking another language already.

‘I don’t like Polish,’ I say.

‘But you *are* Polish.’

‘I am *now*.’

‘You always will be.’

My body tenses. Now that he looks at me, my confidence wobbles as if during a magnificent dance it slipped.

‘I can move to another country,’ I say trying to maintain my gaze on his face. ‘I’ll move and never come back.’

Grandfather shakes his head.

‘Poland is a beautiful country...’

‘I don’t like it.’

‘Oh, Kasiu.’

Slowly he lifts himself up from the chair. It takes him a few steps to straighten his back. With my arms still crossed over the chest, I follow him to the kitchen.

He starts preparing sandwiches. Cuts the bread into thick slices and scrubs the butter with the same knife. He gently wraps the remaining block of butter in baking paper and places it in the fridge. Two slices of ham on each slice of bread, then cucumber shaved off its skin. I shake my head when he picks a tomato. He cuts a piece for himself.

The water’s screaming to escape the kettle but Grandfather doesn’t rush. I realise he uses this time to think of the best answer. It occurs to me he believes what I say. It occurs to me that nobody else would.

For a few weeks I'm ready for school on time. On Sunday evening I'm hugging Ania goodbye with one leg already in the library and my hands caressing the pages of the dictionary the same way she caresses my back.

'When will we see each other next?' she asks.

'At Grandfather's probably.'

She nods. 'Maybe your parents will visit mine.'

Still in the embrace we gaze at our parents who're making vague plans with no times and no places. *Mama's* laughing to tears at something *Auntie's* said, *Tata* gives Uncle advice on how to play basic chords on the guitar he's lend him now that he has less time to play himself.

'I'm sure they will,' I say and kiss Ania on a cheek, my lips brushing the corner of her lips. She hugs me tighter before we let each other go, but I can feel the warmth of her hands on my back and the tickling of her words in my ears long after I leave her flat.

I imagine us living together in a foreign country where nobody knows we are cousins. I like it when people don't see we're related. After all, we look very different - Ania's lips are fuller, her eyelashes longer and her chin is marked with a dimple she hates. I tell her it's cute and unique, but she says that's exactly what she hates about it. It divides her chin into two, she complains, and I laugh, certain she must be joking. She doesn't take it well.

For weeks she's been trying to draw a picture of me and at first I'm flattered, but as the sketch becomes sharper and the lines defined, I discover more and more things wrong with my face.

'Are my nostrils that big?' I say when she presents me with another draft.

'No, no,' she says snatching the paper off my hands then furiously rubbing the nostrils with an index finger until the shade around nostrils blends with the rest of the face. She makes new lines with the pencil but now the nose looks dirty. I'm about to say something when she grunts, then tears the drawing into small pieces, stands up and throws it into the bin.

'But it was so good,' I say. I've never seen Ania angry with a drawing before.

'I didn't like it,' she says. I wait for her to reach for a blank piece of paper, but instead she suggests we check what her parents are doing.

'Maybe they want to watch a film,' she says.

I am possessed by an English girl.

She haunts me only during the day, I can never persuade her to stay with me throughout the night.

At first, to make her appear, I have to invite her consciously. She reacts to words that are made of clouds like *marshmallow* and *melody*. But then she begins whispering to me when I don't expect her to be there. When I wake up at seven, she whispers *quick* and *why*. During a maths class, she whispers *crazy* and *boring*. When Grandfather picks me up at four it's hard not to say *hello!* *Cześć* sounds like worn-out word.

I feed the girl late in the evenings, the diet of Cartoon Network and songs from my parents' foreign CDs. On weekends, I do nothing but eat new English words, even though I don't understand what most of them mean.

I dream about dreaming in English. Overhear a conversation between two boys in my class which confirms it's the final step of transition, the moment when there'll no longer be a split between the English girl and me. One of the boys' *tata* is turning German. He lives in Germany and sometimes when they talk on the phone, he can't find a Polish word and uses German instead.

'Sometimes, he calls me Kaspar,' the boy says. 'But my *mama* doesn't like it. She said if he does it again, I should stop talking to him for good.'

I can't understand why anyone would want to kill the sprouts of another language growing inside them. Even if some of it is weeds.

There are two houses which fit the description from the newspaper's ad. It's the first time she doesn't use an agency to find a job. She's counted the money and realised she wouldn't be able to pay them anyway, even if they offered her a loan.

She stands in front of the first door for a while, then moves to the door of the other house. It has the lights on upstairs. She takes a deep breath then knocks.

The woman who opens is as old as *Babcia*. She's in the wheelchair which she moves elegantly across the clean floor. She smiles when she sees *Babcia* and her smile remains glued to her face regardless of what she does. If she's really happy, she'll show her teeth, if she's enduring the pain, her lips will seal closed.

Babcia enters the house which must have been recently cleaned. Does the old maid still live in one of the three rooms? But when the woman opens her mouth, her voice comes out harsh and dry, and *Babcia* recognises it's from not speaking for what must have been a very long time. The words reach *Babcia* slowly, each vowel sings for a while before another joins in. She follows the woman into the kitchen carrying the heavy suitcase above the floor, so as not to scratch the surface.

The woman, her name is Velna, offers *Babcia* a cup of tea. *Babcia*'s heart drops. She tries to stop herself from crying, but the tears run down her cheeks as if someone poured water over her head.

'I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' she says shaking her head and Velna shakes her head like *Babcia*'s mirror reflection.

'It's okay, you're tired,' she tells *Babcia*. 'Come, sit.'

'I'm tired, I'm tired.'

As she repeats these words after Velna, *Babcia* realises she never thought she'd be able to say in English what she really feels, but in these words there's her whole journey, her struggle, her prayers.

'I'm tired,' she says one last time, letting her neck relax and her head drop on the back of the sofa. Velna nods her head.

'You're here now.'

4

Three years later standing outside the school's building I feel something breaking inside me, something nobody can see, like a window shattered in the middle of the night. I'm twelve and my last year of primary school is about to begin.

I see three nerdy boys from my class walking together towards the entrance, talking in thin voices about something only they can understand. In the corner of my eye, I see Marta, the quiet girl who's anxiously scanning the playground until she spots Agnieszka and her face relaxes into a gentle smile. There's a boy who once asked me if he could copy my homework, and I agreed thinking it would be a start of something that makes me feel stupid just thinking about.

Some of my classmates have already decided which schools they're going to next. Some of them are waiting for their best friends to confirm their choices while others are eager to leave and make new friends.

I wait.

I still have few months to decide and my parents never pressure me, busy recruiting new assistants and dentists. Their expectations are impossible to meet, so every new person they interview fails. I hope that something happens to the dentistry and they have to go back to their low-paid hospital jobs and spend evenings with Ania's parents discussing politics and dreading Mondays.

After most of my classmates enter the building, I walk in myself. The smell of sweat and rubber soles fill my nostrils as I trudge down the stairs into the basement where the cloakrooms are. They looked like prison cells. I hang my jacket on a hook with a number that doesn't make any difference. By the time I finish, it would have been moved some hook else. I empty the pockets. If they hang too low somebody will go through them and even if they don't find anything valuable inside, they'll rip the bottom open out of frustration or just for fun.

I start back up the stairs. The sandwich *Mama* made for me is shifting in my backpack. I pass a few more of my classmates. I smile at two of them and instantly pray they haven't noticed. I continue with arms crossed over my chest, eyes fixed on the floor. When I arrive at the classroom, I throw my backpack on the floor and slide down the cold wall.

My classmates return from holidays tanned and taller than the previous term, although none of them has reached my height yet. Along with new clothes and new haircuts, they bring new words, sharp and violent, that make everything sound banned and exciting. I have never imagined Polish could sound like this. Words like *faza*, two strong syllables

fresh like sea breeze on a hot day. Or *zajebyście*, which you might try to smuggle through parental radar, verging on vulgarity, but appearing in songs. Maybe I could be one of them if I spoke Polish like they do? I try to catch these words, tame them, make them my own, but no matter how much I repeat them to myself, they remain wild.

When the teacher appears, I get up and blend into the crowd. I let my classmates decide where I'll sit this term. I let them pick their rows, their desks, their windows. As I walk towards an empty chair of the very last desk, I notice that the only other person sitting on their own is the class' biggest bully as if my silence posed the same threat as his violence does.

The first three lessons take place in the same room. I spend breaks in my seat making myself look busy, analysing the schedule, plotting the ways in which I can skip P.E.

A boy pushes another boy, who trips and falls on my desk. As he pushes himself up, he tears the page of my notebook.

'Watch it!' he yells, turning towards me. I gaze down, my face burning. No boy in my class ever looks into my eyes.

After maths, I go to the bathroom. The floor is sticky and the whole place stinks of bleach. The first five cubicles are empty, but I choose the last one. I close the door and kick it to make sure it would resist somebody else's kick. I put the toilet seat down, take a deep breath and close my eyes.

Only four lessons left.

The main doors open and shut and the space fills with chatter. The girls from the A class, the worst one in our school.

The clicking of the lighter. Laughter, loud sighs.

These girls never use bathrooms to pee, but to smoke cigarettes and discuss important things. Their conversations float between hot boys and girls they find gross, pop music, their merciless *Mamas* and *Tatas* who are always misunderstood.

No, they don't call them *mamas* and *tatas*. They are Mothers and Fathers, words blue and sterile like hospital walls.

My heart jumps when one of them knocks on the doors of the cubicle next to mine.

'Did you hear anything?' she says. 'Hey!'

'I guess it's a mouse. Any mice in here?' another one joins in, knocking harder. I hide my face in my hands and wait until I hear them return to their places on the windowsill. The lighter clicks again, loud like a heartbeat.

They giggle. I'm sure they know I've been hiding, maybe even know which cubicle I'm in. I sit still, expecting the doors to be kicked open any time.

The laughter stops, then starts again.

When the bell rings the girls don't leave and neither do I. I'll be marked as absent on the first day of school. What will I tell *Mama* when she asks me to explain? That I couldn't leave the bathroom because other people were there?

'See you later, little mouse!' one of them calls and I hear their footsteps followed by the shutting of doors. For a while longer I don't move, waiting for them to come back and see the coward who's been hiding in the cubicle.

Later when I tell *Mama* I've felt sick again she shakes her head and looks at my hands.

Two days later hidden in the cubicle I overhear the same girls talking about a boy one of them kissed.

‘He stuck his tongue in before I could say anything.’

‘Ugh! What did you do?’

‘What do you think I did?’

‘Ugh!’

‘Gross!’

‘Oh, come on, who cares...Jesus...Just don’t tell anyone, okay?’

‘My sister said you should only tongue kiss a guy if you go out with him. Otherwise, they’ll think you’re a slut.’

‘Whatever. If I cared what they thought, I’d never hang out with you two.’

When I return to the classroom, the teacher asks me to show her my homework which I don’t have. I spend a long time rummaging through my backpack pretending to search for my notebook.

‘I’m sorry,’ I say, hoping she will ask someone else, but instead she walks over to my chair, grabs my backpack and, turning it upside down, empties it onto my desk.

‘What’s all this?’ she says. Moving the books to one side she reveals the sandwiches that have been rotting on the bottom of my backpack for weeks.

‘You!’ she turns her head and points at one of the boys. ‘Open the window! It stinks in here!’

For the first time nobody laughs at me, nobody even looks. I stand in front of my desk until the teacher tells me to sit down. When the bell rings I rush to the bathroom. I throw all the sandwiches into the toilet, but no matter how many times I flush, some pieces remain adrift.

I will never tell Ania about this.

I will never tell Ania about this.

I will never tell Ania about this.

Mama 's never informed about what happened on that day. She continues to make me sandwiches and I continue to thank her for them, put them in the backpack then throw them away before the first class starts.

It is October when I first hear they call me a skunk.

The words they use on me sound better in English. I learn them. I find them in the dictionary. Write them down. I want to burn them afterwards, but I'm scared I'd cause fire.

'You should only tongue kiss a guy you want to go out with,' I say.

'What?'

'Otherwise they'll call you a slut.'

'That makes sense,' Ania says fixing her eyes on the screen. In the film we're watching a couple is walking down the street holding hands. Her hand is clasping his stronger than his hand hers.

'Do you think our *mamas* kissed anyone before they met *Tatas*?'

'There were some boys they liked, right?'

'I guess... but then I don't know, back then it was probably controversial even to hold hands.'

I nod slowly. We'll never be able to find out the truth, our *mamas* only telling the stories that can teach us something, even if they're not true.

'It's gross.'

'What?'

'I don't know. I can't imagine kissing anyone from my class,' a grimace of disgust appears on her face.

'Yeah, same.'

'Has anyone?'

'What?'

'Kissed in your class?'

I go through my classmates' faces.

'I don't think so.'

'I wonder...' she says, and we watch the rest of the film wondering together.

Velna had a daughter she tells *Babcia* about, but *Babcia* doesn't understand the past tense and smiles widely and asks what her name is and Velna answers, a little surprised by the reaction, gives her the name and *Babcia* says she would love to meet her, and again looks around deciding that it must be the daughter who'd cleaned the flat so well before she arrived.

'Good children help parents,' she says. Velna's eyes focus on the furthest window and in those eyes *Babcia* sees words she didn't understand. Nervously, she looks for something to say. She thinks of her little sister, the favourite one who died before their *tata* came back from the War. When they told him what happened, he shook his head, then for the rest of his short life at least once a day asked *Babcia* where Gienia was. At first *Babcia* tried to explain but then she started to make up stories. Gienia was feeding the chickens, she went out with the cows, was visiting the priest.

There were no chickens, no cows, no priest. But when she talked to her *tata* they were all alive. She could promise at times she heard the clucking of a hen walking into the house with a confidence of an awaited guest or the smell of a cake her Auntie had baked for the visit of the priest.

There were no hens, no Auntie, no priest.

There was a fire and the whole house burned down, only Velna survived. She ran out red like a struck match, her hair in the aura of smoke. She collapsed on the tarmac and never got up.

‘It’s a wig,’ she smiles pulling the front of her hairline towards her nose. *Babcia* smiles and touches her own teeth.

‘No teeth,’ she says.

Velna doesn't ask *Babcia* for anything and sometimes they sit together on the porch drinking iced tea and watching children circle the block on their bikes. The light. Rare wind brings the smell of flowers *Babcia* has never smelled before. New friends.

She never thinks about next day. She wakes up, makes breakfast, cleans up the hallway, hovers the carpet in the living room. The hoover's old and sometimes instead of breathing it in, it coughs the dust out. It seems to be happening whenever *Babcia* forgets she's doing a difficult job.

The neighbour, a very nice woman who says hello every time she sees *Babcia*, tells her that Velna is happy.

'You,' she points at *Babcia* with a finger, ringed and yellow from cigarettes which always bob from her mouth. *Babcia* laughs.

'Velna good woman. Good boss,' she replies.

Later, she feels like apologising to Velna for calling her a boss in front of the neighbour even though that's who Velna is. Her boss. For the rest of the day *Babcia* performs her chores automatically like a house robot. Velna's busy writing letters, she spends one day a week on them, and later *Babcia* will take them to the Post Office. She never checks the delivery address, but today she worries that there might be other women like her, cleaners and maids whom Velna reaches out to just in case *Babcia* fails her. She realises she hasn't found the next job yet. It's never happened to her before.

Still, she doesn't start searching. Is it because she's hoping to stay? How long for? She asks this herself staring at the photo of us stuck to the wall over her bed.

There's an envelope taped to the bottom of the box *Babcia* sends before Christmas. Inside we find a hundred-dollar bill. Our *mamas'* voices grow high in excitement of naming everything we could get for it. Grandfather sits in his armchair shaking his head.

He says there are Communist Spies who work at the Post Office. They check all the parcels and read all the letters. They do it twice if they see an American stamp.

'She should be more careful sending us money like this,' the envelope waves in his hand.

'Smell it,' says *Tata* passing me the hundred-dollar bill. 'This is what real money smells like.'

A hundred dollars smells like old fur coat and a pack of Big Red chewing gum.

Mama’s worried about my weight. She takes me to doctors who put me on scales and ask me why I want to upset my parents. While I’m getting dressed they talk about me as if I’m not there. I feel I’m disappearing underneath my clothes.

‘You need to feed her more. She’s growing. Needs energy.’

Mama pulls my hand when we leave the office. She pulls me down the corridor stairs. Everything echoes. The world seems very small and I’m too big for it. I try to release my hand off her grip, but her hand, smaller than mine, is stronger.

‘Slow down,’ I mumble, but she ignores me. She gets in the car and turns the engine on before I open the doors. For a moment I think she’ll leave me behind. The world gets even smaller.

At a Sunday dinner my parents tell Grandfather I have to eat more.

‘How much does she weigh?’ he asks, moving a couple of boiled potatoes from his plate to mine.

They look at me. *Tata* shrugs.

‘Not enough,’ *Mama* says. ‘Forty kilos.’

I don’t correct her.

Throughout our journey home I think about the number. I think about the scales in the bathroom, my two feet stepping on it and the number announcing itself to me as if I’ve won it. I think of other things that weigh forty kilos. To weigh as much as a newborn calf.

Mama buys me all the food I want regardless of the quality or price. I pick up bags of crisps and handfuls of chocolate bars in the supermarket we visit if the last patient doesn't show up. I walk slowly between the isles, analysing the packaging of products, the works of art in temptation. The tall and heavy bodies of shelves exhibiting cans and tins like organs to the eyes of bewildered audience. I pick up a bottle of chocolate milk and look at *Mama*, my hand suspended between her trolley and the shelf.

'You have to eat more than sweets,' she says.

She names each product we pass.

'Yogurt? Maybe bread? We could make some sandwiches. Maybe chicken? You like chicken.'

I shake my head.

'If she wants to starve, let her starve,' *Tata* says.

Grandfather waits for me to apologise to him. He's sitting in the armchair like a king listening to my confessions. He wants me to report the exact order of things as they happened even though he was there himself.

'When you say you're sorry you confirm you understand what you did was wrong,' he says.

'It's like signing a contract,' he adds.

I'm the one who's always the signee. No matter how angry I get with him, he never thinks he's in the wrong.

Like the time we went shopping together and he asked what I wanted for dinner. I said I didn't mind and he said I should. I asked him why and he got offended, I could see it already, he sucked his lips, but I ignored it knowing my question was valid. He said if I didn't mind, people would do whatever they wanted with me and I said I didn't mind if they did. It was a provocation I knew it, but I was upset with him for getting upset over nothing. He told me not to talk to him like this, like what, like a spoiled brat, maybe I am a spoiled brat. He went quiet.

I helped him carry the bags home, but he didn't say thank you. Afterwards I stood in front of his armchair and apologised.

.

Mama signs a contract for the new dental clinic. On Monday we go together to check it out. When we walk in, we find there's nothing but white walls and a green-tiled floor. *Mama* and *Tata* are overjoyed. They move quickly, their steps echoing between the rooms they march through calling out design ideas.

'Now the only thing left is to install the units, the office could be in the back...' *Tata* says as we get in the car.

Mama asks how I like it and I say it's cool.

'One day it'll be yours,' she says.

'Unless I die before you.'

They continue to visualise the rooms. Only when we get to the town centre does *Tata* remember I'm in the back seat. He turns around to drive me to school but we hit the morning traffic and I miss the first lesson.

I forget about the dental clinic for the rest of the day but in the evening when parents come home from work, *Tata* asks me what my friends thought.

'About what?'

'The clinic?'

I tell him the truth. I didn't say anything.

Mama's surprised in this horrible way which makes my stomach cramp.

'But what was I supposed to say?'

'Aren't you proud of your parents for making it this far?'

'I'm very proud. But what was I supposed to say? When? Hi, my parents bought a new dental clinic?'

'When I was your age, I didn't have it so easy. I thanked my mother for every little thing.'

I say I'm sorry but it doesn't work on *Mama*. She says one day I'll see what it's like myself.

We watch a film in which a man kisses a woman who doesn't want to be kissed, but he persists and eventually her body relaxes, and her mouth accepts his.

We admire the woman's heavy eyelids, her face painted in controlled fear. I wish I could make myself vulnerable and fragile. I wish my weakness could attract others. But instead, I'm lame, I'm boring. I come across as a person who never has fun. The woman's face shifts and the fear is gone as if it was make-up a single word could wipe off. Now her eyes are sparkling with playfulness we never see in our *mamas'* eyes, only actresses and models in magazines they read. Why are these women so different from them?

'He's not even handsome,' Ania mutters and for the first time I look at the man. He's a construction of all elements which should work. He's wearing a suit but without a jacket to make him appear both laid back and elegant. He's sipping on a drink as expensive as his clothes but doesn't order more than one glass. He's unshaved, but the hair on his chin is tamed and smothered as if it was a shadow striking his face. And yet, like Ania I don't find him attractive. I move my eyes away, so as not to waste another gaze on him.

The film ends with the man leaving the woman. Ania says it's because she was too easy and I agree.

My cold foot touches her warm foot and a little scream escapes her mouth. I chuckle. God, what's wrong with you? My feet are always cold. *You're* always cold. She checks my body with the thermometer of her palm. Stops on my stomach, but her fingers don't rest. They examine my body further, and when I turn to the side, her hand slips onto my hip. Is this your bone? Yes. We stare at each other like astronauts approaching an alien planet. Our faces seem closer than they are. My hand finds the crescent of her hip. The soft material of her pyjamas, the pink field of sheep, the total number of which we never reach in our many attempts to count them. Her hand lower now, the harsh terrain of my thighs. Tickling. The small hair I'm ashamed of. And this? I've never thought about the bones on the back of my thighs. My thighs, I hate them. Hand trembles. Ania moves over to her back. You're really bony. My heart beats fast. I want her fingers to continue their journey. I want to feel my ribs between them, my collarbone blessed with her fingertips' touch. We lie next to each other, still and silent before she turns around.

She asks me to tell her a story, like I used to, and I tell a story of a boy and a girl who didn't know they were siblings. They were brought up by different families, separated at birth, then found each other as students of the same school. She was bullied by four boys, who surrounded her on the playground and mocked her clothes, when he came out of nowhere. He spoke in a soft voice, but they heard him the moment he uttered the first word. For a long time, he's lived abroad, you could tell by his clothes. Other boys wanted to be like him, but he didn't care to impress them. He was fearless in a sort of nothing-to-lose way.

When their eyes met, they knew it was something else, but only later, weeks later after the dance at the school disco (everyone watched, she looked so beautiful!), he asked his mother for the photos from the past. She said there were none, but he knew she was lying. When she fell asleep after a long day of work, he crept into the office and deep in the drawer he found an envelope with the copy of a birth certificate which belonged to the girl.

He never told her about it.

Ania asks me not to finish the story and so I never do.

Sometimes I have to wait for my parents until midnight. I pray and fall asleep, wake up again and pray.

But as I pray my mind wanders around the dark corridors of blasphemies, walls of images which terrify and excite me. I wonder if I'm sick, perverted. I want to ask Ania if she has thoughts like this too, but my throat goes dry just thinking the question.

Maybe if I pray they'll leave me, I think. Maybe it's the devil stealing me from God.

A voice in my head laughs at this thought. There's no God, it says.

‘What if I won’t grow anymore?’ Ania’s crying again. Grandfather turns the TV off and gets up from his armchair.

‘I make you something to eat,’ he says.

‘It’s not fair! I look like a munchkin next to you.’

‘You’re growing, don’t worry. You see yourself every day, so you don’t notice.’

‘Can you tell?’

I look her up and down and nod. She’s taller than a year before and the year before that, but it’s true that next to me it seems like her height hasn’t changed. I pray a thousand times a night to stop growing. At the age of twelve I’m Auntie’s height, the tallest woman in our closest family.

‘You’ll be a supermodel,’ Grandfather says when Ania isn’t there. I never complain to him about my height. He must be reading my mind.

‘You’re taller than *Babcia* and Grandfather, your *mama*...’ Ania says.

‘Are there many tall girls in your class?’

‘There are some,’ she says. ‘But not as tall as you.’

At night I'm biting my nails, waiting for the first light of dawn. I barely move, only my hands are shaking and I can't stop grinding my back teeth.

I know it's the middle of the night because it's so dark I have to wait before I can see anything and when I finally do, I can't tell what I'm looking at. I know I won't fall asleep again that night or if I do, I'll have nightmares.

I have a lot of nightmares but every time I wake up a moment before something final is about to happen, I'm about to drop dead on the floor falling from the crushing height of spiral stairs or drown in the depth of black water after struggling to survive for ages.

When I close my eyes, I try to imagine Jesus. He's on the Cross wearing the crown of thorns and the Cross is on fire.

I calm down. Sometimes I manage to get back to sleep.

When I have a nightmare and she's next to me, I wake Ania up.

'You're asleep?' I say, nudging her gently.

I pretend I can't sleep because I'm not tired.

'But I am,' she mutters. Her voice calms me down even when she mumbles some gibberish.

One night, the first weekend after the school starts again her voice startles me.

'What happened?' she says. I wait for my heart to slow down.

'Nothing,' I say, my throat dry.

'But you jumped.'

'I didn't know you were awake.'

'Why aren't you sleeping?'

'I can't. I'm not tired.'

'I don't understand,' she turns on her side to face the window.

'You used to tell me everything,' she says.

I ignore the threats and shouting at the breakfast table. I tell parents it's my stomach, it hurts. We go to the doctor's and he prescribes me little yellow pills, but after three days *Tata* decides I won't be taking them. He's concerned they'll change me, says there's nothing wrong with me.

'We just want you to be healthy, you know?' he says and in his eyes I can see the same worry I find in *Mama's*.

'I know.'

'Do what you want,' he says a few days later, then says if I continue to act this way, the stress will eat them from inside.

'Cancer,' he announces bluntly. Afterwards I lie in bed apologising to God for every bad thought I've ever had of my parents. I promise I'll do whatever He wants if He only spares them. The next morning, I have three sandwiches instead of two and at school I bite into turkey. I barely manage half before I give up.

I leave the sandwich in the cubicle on top of the toilet cursing myself for not having thought this before. Still, as I exit I feel all eyes are on me. A girl swifts past me into the cubicle I've just left and I rush out imagining her finding the sandwich and showing it to everyone else.

In winter our parents sign us up to the swimming pool in town. Our *tatas* used to swim a lot, they could have been professional if they continued and although neither Auntie nor *Mama* can swim, they reassure us we'll have a great time. Besides, they tell us, you can't sit home all day.

The building's behind the Chinese Restaurant which is also a strip club. There's a poster of a woman, in lingerie, hanging upside down, her hands grabbing the steel pole like one grabs an attacker's neck. Next to it, a poster promoting the New Menu, which has been the same since the restaurant opened two years ago. I've never had Chinese food and it's the only Chinese restaurant in Białystok. I stare at the meat cooked golden brown, and saliva gathers in the corners of my mouth. I turn my eyes and see the woman. I can't take my eyes off her the same way I can't take my eyes off the food.

Ania's shy about her weight. She's wearing a two-piece swimming suit, but wishes she was wearing a one-piece like I do. I massage my hip bones as we pass naked women on our way down the changing room towards the entry to the pools.

Ania's disgusted, but I admire their unembarrassed movements. They wash themselves properly in the showers as if they were saving money on water at home. Some of them have hair under armpits and all of them have pubic hair.

Ania keeps commenting on them in whisper as loud and bold as the women's naked bodies.

'Okay, okay,' I whisper back to her. 'I get it.'

Like Ania, I'm embarrassed by the women. They awaken something more in me, a sense of envy. I don't want to be like them, but I wish I had the courage to show my body like they do, rather than fear that it might be seen one day.

The water in the pool is freezing. I can dip my foot, but as soon as the water touches my calf, I stop myself from descending. Ania uses technique her *tata* taught her a few days earlier. She recites the days of the week and on a Sunday she dives in and swims away from the ladder as fast as she can if the ladder was chasing her. She's a worse swimmer than I am but has more stamina. She can stay all day in the water and never get cold.

My whole skin is goosebumped like that of an uncooked chicken. I rub it with hands cold from the water. Few strokes one way and few strokes the other.

I am faster than she is. My body has taught me to be fast when it started growing and when with an indifference of a stranger it demanded me to adjust my pace to its own.

I've learned to run on my ankles while my bones stretched out in excruciating pain. I've learned to write with fingers which lengthened like parasites. I've learned to accept that whenever I picked up the phone, the person on the other side mistook me for a boy, my voice at the age of thirteen lower than *Mama's*, twenty years older than me.

At school I move fast, bite my nails fast, I drop the food into trashcans fast. I can't catch up with myself. Before I can think of where I want to be next, I'm already leaving that place. I am faster than days, than weeks, than time, I am faster than all the elements combined. This speed makes me invisible.

The less the body weighs, the less it resists the water. Each week I try to bring less of myself to the swimming pool to test this theory and it works. Soon the water carries me with it like a bottle with a message inside, traveling across the ocean. I hitchhike a ride on the waves a man in the fast lane has aroused. But the less the body weighs the quicker it grows cold, and I spend most of my time in the swimming pool shivering, waiting for our time to end.

Afterwards, Uncle buys us hot chocolate from the vending machine. We're in our winter jackets and our winter hats and we hold our cups in gloved hands. I burn my tongue and yet I can't wait until the chocolate cools down. Each sip that follows electrifies my tongue. I can't taste anything. I imagine this is what kissing feels like.

‘When do you think they’ll let you use make up?’

We’re sitting on the sofa in the living room in her flat, paging through Auntie’s old magazines. We’re only allowed ones that are out of date. Auntie says she doesn’t want any greasy hands touching the pages, and it’s true that Ania likes to snack when we go through them.

We learn the names of the models and actresses we want to look like. Ania’s the first one to notice the make-up they have.

From the magazines I learn that my eyes are too small and my lips are too thin. But my waist is the size women magazines like. My ribs show without any effort of holding the breath in. If Ania accidentally hits my knee, she can get bruised. When I bend my back, my bones poke out like a dragon’s thorny spine.

‘Ugh, don’t show me that,’ Ania frowns when I bend down, then moments later asks me to do it again.

‘I wish I had bones,’ she says.

I learn that a visible collarbone is something every woman envies.

There’s a world where my body is desired.

My last year of primary school is the year I bite my nails until they bleed, *Mama* donates all my dolls to the clinic, and a very smart doctor announces I'm too thin.

'Are you doing well at school?' he asks me.

'What are her grades like?' he asks my parents.

'Do you do your homework every day?'

He isn't happy when I'm doing well, he isn't happy when I say I have good marks.

'If you don't eat,' he says. 'You'll die.'

Mama grabs my hand, always cold. She likes to blow air into it and rub it warm, but now she's holding it tightly, crushing my bones.

'What does she eat?' he asks and my parents tell him what they eat, stumbling over breakfast. They worry out loud that the school is not feeding me well.

'I make her sandwiches,' *Mama* ensures.

'You might need to tell someone to watch her,' he says.

We leave his office in silence.

I start to watch myself. The way my hands move as they reach for the spoon, the way my bones rearrange themselves underneath my skin whenever I move. The gesticulation of other people's hands. *Mama's* are smaller than mine, round with short fingers. *Ania's* are smaller too, but the ends of her fingers are sharp as if made to point things out. *Tata* bites his nails, too, but he never touches his cuticles. His hands are big, fingertips square like shovels, like mine.

I cup my waist with my hands. When my fingers meet, I feel hot with excitement. Do the same with wrists. My left wrist is larger than the right one.

Fatter.

Every day I work on making them even. At the dinner table, between bites of food, I make circles with my hands.

I realise the problem's in my legs. I cry hoping that if I cry long enough eventually God will give me better knees. I cup my ankles and my fingers don't lock. I blame Grandfather and his Genes.

There are days I don't look at my legs at all, and days when I look at them all the time. When I don't look, I touch them. I stroke and pinch my thighs, I grasp the skin of my calves. I grasp the skin of my arm. I want my calves to be like my arms.

Sometimes I wake up, startled by the movements of my hands. I feel for the small hair on my legs and despise them. The legs of the girls in my class are those of porcelain dolls, long and skinny, cold and smooth. My whole body feels swollen and I slouch under the weight of hate and disgust I feel towards myself. My body - the land I need to escape.

For Christmas she gets a gift. She doesn't understand it at first - Velna handing her an object wrapped in red paper. She asks if Velna wants it to be sent anywhere. She turns it around in her hands, there's no address. She wonders what day the Post Office opens after Christmas break when Velna bursts out laughing.

'No, no, for you!' she says.

'For me?'

Velna nods covering her mouth. *Babcia's* eyes open wider.

She unwraps it gently, the same gentleness with which she packs the gifts she sends us. She realises it's been a while since she's gotten anything from anyone. How could eight years have passed so quickly? Her eyes well up with tears.

'It's my favourite,' Velna says when the wrapper tears to reveal the book title. *Babcia* tries to read it, but she stumbles on every word. Her ears fill up with foamy sound and her cheeks burn in embarrassment.

'Thank you,' she hears herself say. She wishes she could say something more, but even in Polish she's empty of words.

She tells Velna about her family. What she can. Velna asks questions to lure more stories out. Some things she guesses, others she seems to know and sometimes *Babcia* wonders if they've met before. Maybe the first time she arrived in America Velna was her neighbour?

But the first time she arrived, she didn't tell anyone anything about herself. She didn't know how. She could barely greet people and even then she was sure they smiled back at her out of pity. So if Velna was there, she wouldn't know what she seems to know.

She's thinking about her *tata* and asks Velna about hers. Velna shakes her head.

'Don't remember him much,' she says. She tells *Babcia* he worked at the mill and draws a simple picture to show her what a mill is. He had an accident, she says, which put him on a drinking spree.

'If drinking was running, he'd win every marathon,' she laughs.

One day when Velna was a baby, her mother packed a lot of clothes in a small bag and ran away with her. For the next year Velna slept under a different ceiling each night, but by the time she could speak, her mother found the address of some cousin far far away and that's how she ended up here, in Monee.

Later Ania will hear another version of this story and we'll argue who got it right. *Babcia* will never confirm whose story is true when we finally confront her. She'll instead tell us about Velna's death. How *Babcia* wrote to her from Poland, but when she got a reply a few months later, it was in handwriting she didn't recognise. Along with the letter a gift came back she'd sent Velna that Christmas. A book of poems in Polish.

When I'll sit with her in the kitchen, nearly a decade after she came back, a single word will open a whole suitcase of stories. America. She'll tell me never to be afraid and I'll nod, afraid this is the last time I'll hear her say that.

I'll ask her what she misses the most and she'll tell me there's nothing to miss, she's missed people and places her whole life but now she's here.

'I have everything,' she'll say.

Babcia's stories end in certain places. Some of them arrive at the moment when *Babcia* leaves a job, others end abruptly in the middle. Maybe she wants to keep those moments for herself?

We'll never find out what happened, why she left. But *Babcia's* last next job was far away, in California, where she took care of two Jewish girls. This is where she's spent her last years in America.

There are so many words in English I can describe my body with. I am *skinny*. I am *frail*.
I am *fragile*.

I am *weak* but my bones are *strong* and *defined*.

I am defined by my bones. I am strong.

Every day my parents ask me how school's been and every day I give them the same answer. Fine. And this time, it isn't a lie. We're getting to the end of the term and the only thing left is to fix a few grades, repeat some tests and survive. The library closes for the final weeks and I spend breaks at the football field outside. Leaning on the wall of the school building I study the notebook with all the English words I've copied throughout the year. But by now I know them by heart, and I'm running out of ideas for sentences I can make with them.

I don't tell Ania about the doctor, but somehow she finds out. We're alone in my flat when she starts the conversation. My parents aren't coming back until very late.

Ania throws an empty bag of crisps on the table in front of us and misses. She leans forward to pick it up, then wipes her hands on her thighs

'But you eat normally,' she says.

My face grows hot. I shift releasing my legs tucked underneath hers. I pull my knees towards my stomach and wrap my arms around them. Ania frowns.

'Do you think there's something wrong with you?' She reaches for a chocolate bar.

'No,' I stare at the chocolate wondering if I want any. Recently it's been hard to tell when I'm hungry. My stomach's often empty, but if I wait long enough my mind becomes empty, too.

'You've always been thin.'

'I know.'

She shrugs. She takes a bite of the chocolate bar.

'Your parents are obsessed,' she says through her chocolate-brown teeth.

I finish school with good marks. After graduation, parents take me to the *Planty* park. They talk about expanding the dental clinic, buying new equipment, maybe even trying to hire someone this time. My ice-cream melts fast. I look up and see a plane in the sky. I think how one day I'll get on a plane with Ania and we'll never come back.

5

Her last house. Los Angeles. A Jewish family, husband and wife with two daughters, a couple years younger than us.

‘It’s where Hollywood is,’ I tell Ania. We’ve been begging my parents to let us watch the Oscars’ ceremony which takes place at three am Polish time. *Tata* says yes, *Mama* says we must be insane. We pretend to go to sleep that night only to wake up a few minutes before the broadcast begins. When in the full darkness we tiptoe to the living room, we find *Tata* sitting on the sofa, waiting for us.

We eat popcorn and comment on everyone’s clothes. *Tata* recognises older actors and recommends films with them. The Polish interpreter needs a few moments to catch up with what the actors are saying, so at times we can hear full sentences in English. I soon lose interest in what’s happening on the screen, and instead focus all my attention on the spoken words. I find that I can understand a lot more than I thought.

Once a week *Babcia* goes shopping with the Jewish girls. She buys them clothes and sweets, and in second-hand shops she finds books in Polish which she buys for Ania and me. In every new letter *Babcia* asks if we've received them. We wait five months for them to arrive.

'They were expensive books,' she writes. 'Make sure they arrive.'

She says Polish books in second-hand shops are a good sign. It means there are more people like her, good people, who read.

She says they are also a bad sign. It means people sell books to get money to buy vodka. She sees whole streets pathed with Polish people, sleeping or begging. She says they're younger than her and drunk all the time.

'Go back to Poland,' she tells them. 'America's for people in need.'

'What am I going to do in Poland?' they ask. 'Be a good woman, help a fellow citizen.'

'Get a job!' she tells them.

'Look at me,' she shows them her hands, white from carrying shopping bags all day. Red from carrying old people from bedrooms to bathrooms, wrinkled from laundering and hand washing clothes.

'Shame on you,' she says.

In her letters, *Babcia* worries about the whole family a lot, especially Ania and me. She worries we don't eat enough, that we don't have fresh clothes, that we don't sleep well. She asks if Grandfather is taking care of us and sometimes I find myself hoping she'll never come back. I want to have an American *Babcia*.

But other times we just wait, thinking of the Jewish girls. Wondering if she ever tells them about us.

When I ask her how big Los Angeles is and if she's seen anyone famous, *Babcia* laughs.

'In America everyone acts like they're famous,' she says. She tells me about the neighbour who carries a tiny dog in her handbag. The dog is ugly, reminds *Babcia* of a rat. The neighbour wears big sunglasses like a movie star and *Babcia* can't tell her age. She wears gowns to the garden and has champagne for breakfast. She falls asleep on the porch ignoring the barking dog.

Babcia finds most of these things silly. When Ania tells her she's jealous that *Babcia* gets to live in such an iconic place, *Babcia* says she prefers quiet towns.

'But all in all, no matter the size, the work's always bigger than the place you're in,' she adds.

'I don't understand,' Ania says.

'And I hope you'll never have to,' *Babcia* replies.

We don't ask her when she's coming back and I realise that it's because we want her to stay there as long as she can, so she tells us stories of things we'd never be able to see even on the TV.

But when she mentions the Jewish girls our conversation ends quicker. I pass the phone to *Mama* before *Babcia* gets a chance to tell me again how well-behaved they are. Ania's more abrupt. She interrupts *Babcia* mid-word and tells her she needs to study. When the phone gets to Auntie, *Babcia* goes silent for a while before she starts again.

Grandfather never speaks of his childhood and I never ask him about it, but Ania's curious and always searching for threads.

'I bet Grandfather's village was full of angry chickens,' she says.

'Was it, *Tato*?' Auntie says lifting an eyebrow.

'I bet everyone was angry there,' *Mama* laughs.

But Grandfather won't be provoked. He pretends he doesn't hear them.

'Oh, *Tato, Tato*,' Auntie gets up and walks over to his armchair, then strokes his hair and kisses him on the head.

'I wish we lived in the village,' Ania says later the same night, long after we've turned the light off. 'Be around so many people all the time.'

'I would go insane.'

'I don't know, I think it would be fun, but to be honest you always liked different things.'

'What do you mean?'

'I don't know. You get bored quicker.'

I think how in a few years we'll pick our universities and possibly get into different ones. Will Ania move out of Białystok? Will I? I can't imagine staying, but for the first time I think that Ania might.

'Tell me a story,' she asks.

'What about?'

'I don't know. You always come up with something.'

I think for a while, but the only story I can imagine is the one about us. I want to tell her how I have thought about our lives together, in a country where nobody knows who we are. But whenever I try to speak, the words cross their arms and refuse to be put into orderly sequence.

'I'm tired,' I lie.

'It doesn't have to be long.'

'I'm sorry,' I say.

Ania turns over to the other side. I stop myself from apologising again. I stroke her back, but she doesn't move.

I write a letter to Ania in which I ask her if she wants to run away with me, then I throw it into the bin. I take it out a moment later and tear it into the smallest pieces. Put one of them in my mouth. I see it in films, people eating the evidence. As saliva softens the paper, I imagine *Mama* finding the letter stuck to the back of my teeth when she next examines me. Swallowing the letter's too difficult and I throw the wet, unreadable pieces into the backpack. I carry them inside for years.

I write another letter in English then start translating it into Polish, but the words stiffen and tense like bad dancers failing to follow the simplest steps. Eventually, they refuse to move, still like humid air.

Ania won't read it anyway. She will never see it. I will never let her. I write more letters to her and every single one ends up shredded on the bottom of the backpack, they become an impossible jigsaw of all my sins. Because to think of something sinful is to already have sinned.

She studies the new house as if she had to pass the exam in which she'll be asked to name all the furniture in every room, every book on the children's bookshelf, all the clothes in the parents' bedroom. She catches herself drifting away into the memories of her childhood house. The oven in the kitchen over which her *mama* and her aunties discussed the wisdom of plants. The neighbouring woods - a better pharmacy than any of the city ones. She blinks away the image of her parents' bedroom, her *tata*'s clothes arranged neatly on the chest of drawers where he used to keep books. He asks for his clothes to be left by his side in case he feels well enough to go out.

And the day she saw her uncle wearing his brother's trousers.

She ran home as fast as she did when they bombed the fields on the first of September. She dashed through the door into her parents' bedroom, ignoring her *mama*'s calling. She stopped by his bed and...

Babcia's eyes return to the room she's in. She stands up and walks over to the night lamp on the girl's side. She wipes the dust off the lamp shade thinking she should get the same lamps for us.

The Jewish girls pretend to speak Polish. They throw quick *zlepki* of unintelligible words, a hectic crowd of vowels and consonants in which everyone's heading a different direction. *Babcia* laughs, pretending to understand them. She replies in Polish. She can give their words any meaning she wants. Sometimes *Babcia* repeats the same phrases, 'You're speaking so lovely, children' or 'What a beautiful story you're telling me'.

Polish becomes the language of birds in the Jewish girls' mouths - beautiful, familiar but impossible to understand.

'Look how pretty you speak!' says *Babcia*. She picks them up from school and for dinner makes Polish *zupas*, *pierogi*, *golqbkki*. Together they steam cabbage leaves and *Babcia* laughs when the Jewish girls pick the leaves up and cover their mouths with them, big like fans in their hands. *Panienki*, she calls them, little ladies, and their eyes reveal their hidden smiles.

They call her their *Babcia*.

On the first day of my new school, I'm wearing the clothes *Mama's* chosen for me, and which I hate. She reminds me I picked them myself when we went shopping, and I tell her it was ages ago, last year, and they make me look childish.

'But you are a child!' she yells, and I turn around on my foot and march out of the flat.

I arrive too early and spend thirty minutes walking around the building guessing the age of every person who enters. I lift the corners of my mouth slightly whenever someone's eyes find mine. I relax my jaw. I scratch my skirt with nails every time my hand itches to find my mouth. Ten minutes before the lessons begin, I walk in.

This school building is bigger than my previous one and stares down at me like a janitor who's monitored generations of students. With each new step I feel myself getting smaller. It's not the kind of smallness which makes you feel safe, but the smallness which makes you squishable like a disgusting insect.

I find my room easily. The hallway's full of students my age and older. I look around but make sure not to appear desperate, just a casual scan through. I think of this word 'casual' and try to put it on, but it doesn't fit me. I'm focused. I'm stiff. If someone was to hit me on the back, I'd fall like a plank of wood and slam into the floor.

I'm overdressed. Girls here wear jeans and I don't even own them. I imagine finding lots of money in the pockets of my summer's jacket for which I could get a pair. I want to turn around and head home, pretend that I'm ill, then get better, make a made-up list of books my teacher asked me to buy, and go shopping with *Mama*, then during our trip draw her attention to the clothes shop. She loves dressing me up. Let her do it. Beg and beg until she says 'alright' then kiss her on the cheek as she pays at the till. Come back. It could work even better. If I arrived at school a day later, they might assume my summer was exciting.

'Hi.'

I jump. She laughs.

'I'm Klaudia.'

'Kasia.'

The most beautiful girl I've ever seen is standing in front of me, shifting from foot to foot. She must be wondering if I'm a mistake, seeking an excuse to pull out the seed of our conversation and plant it somewhere else.

'You're the new girl, right?'

I blush.

‘You’ll like it here. Where do you live?’

I can’t tell if she means the actual street, or just a general direction.

‘You turn right at the bus stop, then walk on for a while like ten minutes or so until you reach the main road...’

I stop when I realise that I sound like I’m giving her instructions. I can see from her smile that she’s pronounced me weird.

‘It’s like a thirty-minute walk,’ I say. ‘Forty.’

‘Cool.’

‘So you live around here?’

‘Yeah,’ she nods at the windows in the back of the corridor ‘Literally around the block.’

‘That must be cool.’

‘You keep bumping into teachers. I wish I lived further.’

A group of older girls passes us and Klaudia lifts her hand and waves. They wave back.

‘See you ‘round,’ she says but before I can reply she’s already joined the group. I feel my nails scratching my other hand’s nails. I stand still for a while before some boy pushes past me on his way to the class.

‘Watch it!’ he hisses and I blush. I lower my head and wait for the bell to ring.

For the first week I'm invisible. I take a seat at the front desk in the middle row where a Girl No-One Speaks To sits. When I say 'hi' she doesn't acknowledge me, and for the next few weeks I wonder if she's realised I'm sitting next to her. She spends every break studying for the next class, going through homework or reading a book, always one book ahead of the one assigned.

At first, I worry that sitting with her will make me unlikeable in the eyes of others, because girls like her get bullied a lot, but as the week progresses I realise that nobody cares. Maybe she's been bullied so much there's nothing left to bully her for.

Everyone knows everyone else. The building holds both levels: the primary and the middle school, and all of my classmates have moved from last year onto the next one indifferent to the big transition I've been through. Friendships stayed intact, reputations unchanged, and inside jokes pepper all the conversations.

I study my classmates like I study English. I watch their interactions and analyse the gestures. I listen for the tone with which they speak to one another. I learn to read their language before I can speak it. At the end of the week, I'm fluent.

And yet I'm The Girl No-One Speaks to, as well. I keep hoping Klaudia would approach me again, but she doesn't even look once in my direction.

My new English teacher mispronounces words. She cripples them with her strong, Polish accent. I raise my hand. For a moment all heads turn towards me and it's like a thousand little lights go off in my mind for no reason. I put my hand down and the heads turn away. Only the Girl No-One Speaks to keeps staring.

I refuse to pronounce the words the way the teacher does. I resist her corrections and she marks me down. The more bad marks I get from her, the better my English becomes.

When the bell rings for the break my ears lock on two girls who I realise are talking about me. I pack my backpack quickly, get up and head towards the door unable though to escape their voices who follow me outside. I expect to hear a word, a word which someone else would also pick up, a word which would stick to me for the rest of my school life, something offensive, something to shove me back to my place.

I hold my breath when they walk past me and as one of them turns I ready myself to hear the word, but instead the girl smiles.

‘You showed her!’ she says revealing her teeth. ‘That’s cool!’

The smell of cloves and sterilised tools, sawdust - it's how the bones are shaved, bleeding gums.

Mama's pulled out eight teeth in a single day. She's tired.

She asks us which pizza we want. The menu's wrinkled and tarnished like a page of an ancient text. I pick a Hawaiian and Ania frowns, not again. We decide on the four cheeses one.

Tata picks one with three different types of meat and asks for the chilli sauce. It's going to be a good evening. We've rented a film we've been looking forward to for ages, and even *Mama* stays up to watch it with us. The pizzas are delivered with two large bottles of Coca Cola, both of which we drink that night.

It's been two weeks since the school's started and nothing bad has happened yet. I haven't made any friends, but even a possibility that I could is new for me. Ania's doing okay, too although she has a new Polish teacher whom she hates. The teacher doesn't care about the books they read, she's all about grammar which Ania calls the maths of the language.

It's Saturday which means we can stay up as long as we want. Parents start work a little later, too, a patient's cancelled and *Mama* doesn't mind. The dental clinic's been doing better than they predicted and sometimes they talk about taking a day off. Right now, even on Sundays they're working, although they finish at three which *Mama* points out every time we argue. She doesn't want me to spend the whole weekend at Ania's, she barely sees me, and I tell her it's not my fault she chooses work over me, this is how every argument starts. This is the first time I have things to share when my parents ask me how the school has been. I have marks I'm proud of, essay topics I want to discuss, but they never have time to listen. I'm jealous whenever Auntie asks Ania about one of her friends or teacher, jealous when I realise she knows their names.

But right now it's different. Right now my parents laugh with us throughout the film and *Mama* wipes a tear when the story ends with characters going their separate ways. I hide my tears, too but Ania can see them and mocks me a little, although I know she's struggling not to cry.

Later we lie in bed staring at the ceiling, letting our voices guide us through the labyrinths of relationships and interactions we're trying to work out. We compare boys and girls from our classes, how they've changed over the summer break, or, as in my case, how they've changed in the last couple of weeks I've known them for. It's the first time I'm saying more than Ania does when the topic of school comes up. But even when

I think I've tired out all the details, she still has more questions. What do girls wear? Are we allowed make-up? Are there any boys...?

She giggles to herself.

'What?'

'Nothing,' she pulls the duvet over her face and giggles underneath it.

'Oh my God, Ania,' I say and we laugh together.

But for some reason I don't tell her about Klaudia even though she's all I think about. I hide her behind the forest of stories about all other students from my class. And if Ania's noticed, she doesn't say anything. Sometimes I wonder if she hides anything from me, too, then tell myself I'm not hiding, I just haven't found the right moment to share.

Back at school, I perform the act of belonging. I laugh with my peers, I perk up when I hear voices behind me, and during breaks remain close to where the crowd gathers even though no matter how close I stand, I don't feel like its part.

The only time I gain visibility is during English classes. A few times when I get the right answer, I produce it with the mixture of laid-backness and lack of self-awareness that is admired among my peers. But there's no strategy in the way I deliver the answers, so later when I try it again, now consciously, it sounds forced so I grow silent watching myself become transparent again.

Then, one day a miracle happens. I'm approached by a boy, not a popular one but one that isn't mocked by the others much, an average student, a good basketball player, some girls would say he's hot. He stops in front of me. I'm sitting on the floor outside the room preparing for our next lesson, and I first notice his shoes and his calves, then look up to find him frowning with an unsure smile. I shoot up and he moves back, his face relaxes.

'*Spokojnie*, calm yourself,' he says and I chuckle nervously trying not to blush.

'Do you have homework for English?' he says like he's the one doing me a favour. I nod eagerly trying to remember what the homework was.

'Can I see it?'

I nod, muster a small yeah, then pick up my backpack and rummage through it. It feels like I have little time even though it's the longest break we get. Finally, I find the exercise book and the page the homework's on. I must have done it a while ago, when everyone else was still studying the earlier chapter. I pass the book to the boy.

'Thanks,' he says as he walks off. I remain standing, confused. Am I supposed to follow him or wait for him to come back? Did he just steal my book? No, it's something my parents would say, always so scared, so paranoid. I decide to sit down and focus on something else but I can't stop thinking about the boy. Does it mean he'll talk to me again? I could do his homework if he asked. Should I offer it to him?

When the bell rings, the boy still hasn't returned. I turn my head to where he went, but he's no longer there. I get up looking around, first calmly then like *Tata* when he can't find the keys to the car.

‘Hey.’ His voice startles me. I peer over my shoulder. He hands me my book and before I can say anything, he’s walking off with a couple of his friends, skipping the lesson.

There's a girl in my class who keeps all her sweets hidden in a cupboard of her bedroom. I hear her share this with another girl, who can't resist any food she spots. If she sees anyone buying a sandwich in a school shop, she gets up and buys the same sandwich even if she's just finished one. If she sees anyone with a bag of crisps, she needs to get a pack herself, and if she doesn't have the money, she asks a person from our class to buy her something small.

Sometimes she borrows money. She keeps the list of people in the final pages of her maths' notebook. Anybody who ends up there stays there forever, and not because she doesn't give the money back. She does. But once she starts borrowing from you, she continues to do so, and for the rest of your school life you have her in debt.

I think about giving her my sandwiches, but she wouldn't want them unless she sees me eating them first. So during one break I take a sandwich out of my backpack, and bite into it. A piece of turkey slips down my throat, it's as bad as I thought it would be. I shiver.

The Girl Who Can't Resist Any Food is sitting next to the Girl Who Keeps Her Sweets in a Cupboard, and the moment she spots me, her eyes freeze. I chew very slowly. I've seen her approach other students if they ate their lunches at this pace.

She stands up. She walks over to me and before she says anything I stretch my arm towards her offering her the sandwich. She gives me the look as if I lifted my skirt to reveal no knickers underneath it. I shift to move my arm closer. I open my mouth to say she can have it, but the girl who can't resist any food turns on her heel and walks off.

My arm remains stretched out for a moment longer, then I draw it back and drop the sandwich into my backpack. I realise I haven't done it for a long time. Every sandwich *Mama's* given me up until now, I managed to throw away before the start of my first lesson.

For the rest of the day I'm looking for the right moment to get rid of it, but whenever I seem to find it, I get distracted trying to decipher the words the Girl Who Can't Resist Any Food whispers to the Girl Who Keeps Her Sweets in a Cupboard, and sometimes the two of them glance at me, and then I see myself from the girl's perspective, my hand reaching for her hand with the sandwich she didn't even want. Pathetic.

The following day I brave myself to approach her and apologise although I can't think of a good reason to apologise. Horrible things come to my mind, apologies for assuming her hunger, assuming her hunger is constant and unabashed.

But the girl isn't there. She's not there that day and not there for the rest of the week. She comes back the following Thursday and when she enters the classroom she walks right past the desk she's been sharing all term with the Girl Who Keeps Her Sweets in a Cupboard, and sits next to another girl, a friend of Klaudia's, who wears braces and who kissed an older boy at the start of the school term. From that day I never see her buy any food and I barely see her eat lunch. Then, she stops eating lunch altogether and before the term ends, she's beautiful and skinny and she smokes her first cigarette behind the school with the girl with braces and another older boy whose name means nothing to them.

I dream about *Babcia*. She gets on the wrong plane and flies to the wrong family. When she arrives, they welcome her as if she were their *Babcia*.

So she stays.

For the next few days I'm convinced the dream's prophetic. For the next few days she's no longer my *Babcia*.

I tell Grandfather about my dream. He laughs. He says *Babcia* would know the route of the plane better than the pilot himself.

'She's the most organised woman I know,' he says. 'She remembers everything.'

But sometimes she gets our names wrong. On the phone she calls me Ania and I don't correct her. When I pass the phone to Ania, she calls her Ania, too.

I drown the carrot in *rosól*, and with my spoon like a guillotine, I cut the top off. If you remove the first thick layer of its body gently with your teeth, it will reveal the thin tree-like skeleton with soft thorns like tiny branches. This part of the carrot is the sweetest.

Tata stares at me and I slurp the piece of carrot off my spoon like it's an oyster. He doesn't blink.

'Paddle, paddle,' he finally says before he returns to his bowl which he finishes a moment later.

Our *mamas* argue at the dinner table. They compare their childhoods, tragic, ignored. Who had it worse? Who was the most neglected? Who stole their parents' attention? Who played the meanest tricks?

Mama was the oldest and had no childhood. She had to mend her own clothes and cook for herself before she was tall enough to reach the cooker. At school the teachers stared at her arms, burned from the failed attempts to make dinner. She was always embarrassed because of that.

Auntie was the youngest and nobody treated her seriously. She had to wear *Mama's* clothes even though they didn't fit her, because Auntie was always taller than *Mama*. She was smart but her smartness remained ignored, so she found herself pretending to be stupid only to satisfy her parents' expectations. When she told them she was getting married they burst out with laughter.

'Who would want you?' they asked,' she says pointing at the ceiling and swinging side to side like a drunken sailor telling a wicked tale. Uncle continues to eat in patient silence even when she flings her arm around his neck.

'What are you saying!' *Mama's* voice grows louder than Auntie's. 'You at least had a real wedding!'

'But what did I have to do to get it!'

Mama lets out a chuckle, bitter, ironic. 'My God!'

Their argument upsets Grandfather. He raises his voice and now they're arguing with him instead, shaping their experiences into a single tragic story, demanding Grandfather to take responsibility for it.

It's the fourth time this week.

Afterwards, *Mama* says she's not coming back as long as Auntie's there, but the following day we return and they argue again.

She says she doesn't know where her mother is and *Tata* sums it up coldly, says if she did, it wouldn't make any difference. *Mama* says he can call his mother any time, and yet he doesn't - what kind of son is he? What kind of grandparents is he providing for his daughter?

Tata chuckles.

Mama strides past the sofa he's been sitting on and stops in front of TV. She's wearing a white T-shirt with no bra underneath it, and I'm embarrassed to see her dark nipples and the lines of her breasts, not much bigger than mine. I hold my breath as if it could make me invisible to her, to them both.

Her hands land on her hips, hard. *Tata* moves to catch a glance of the screen behind her. It's their little game and it usually ends with threats of divorce.

I get up from the armchair before she notices me and walk behind her into my bedroom. I can hear her voice getting louder. Now she calls *Tata* useless. They never do anything outside of work, and she feels like a slave. Home - work, work - home, what kind of life is this! *Tata*'s still quiet, but soon he'll join her in shouting.

We have a beautiful flat. It grows prettier each week when during her dinner break, instead of going to Grandfather's, *Mama* visits a shop which opened recently next to the dentistry. From the outside- an inconspicuous neighbour - inside overflowing with unnecessary stuff, all sweet and pretty, comfort food for the soul. So instead of dinner, *Mama* has tea coasters, and fake flowers, and glass bowls and figurines (she particularly likes elephants, which she says symbolise longevity). Our flat fills up with small, fragile things, which seem to exist only to be lost or broken.

I sit on the chair at the desk. It's a new desk *Mama*'s bought me for the money she said she wouldn't have if she didn't work on Sundays. They're doing this for me and she wants me to understand. I nod. I say, I wish we could spend more time together and she sweeps my fringe to the side, and says she would like it, too.

The sandwich is still lying on the bottom of my backpack. I take out my English notebook and open it on the chapter we'll study from tomorrow. We're going to learn how to talk about our feelings. We'll learn to be excited and annoyed and scared. All of that in English. We'll learn that one character is angry with another, while some other character feels ashamed. There will be questions. How do these situations make us feel?

Somebody's late.

Somebody' lying.

Somebody's telling a joke.

I close the book. Bite all the nails. At the end of the day they seem to be growing back and sometimes I wonder what would happen if I left them unbitten for the whole night. Would I wake up with nails like Ania's? Would I be able to paint them with *Mama's* red nail polish?

As I picture Grandfather praising my nails, my parents' shouting grows louder and the TV's now off, *Tata* must be standing over *Mama* who has sat on the sofa, covered her face with her hands and is about to start crying.

A couple of hours later she knocks on my doors and opens it slightly.

'You're not asleep yet?'

'I'm doing homework.'

'Don't stay up too long.'

'Okay.'

How does it make me feel? In English, how does it make me feel?

Babcia advises against any pets for children. She says it never brings anything good. Actually, children forget about their pets quickly and then it's their parents' responsibility, and they have so much on their mind that the pets become hers.

She's now had a turtle, two guinea pigs, an aquarium of tropical fish, and a dog. The dog is the worst, she writes. Every day she has to wake up before the family, so she can take him out for a walk around the neighbourhood. Three am. Completely dark. The only light the truck collecting rubbish few streets away. The dog - doesn't stop barking. He barks and barks until at least one window in each house they pass goes bright.

'The dog doesn't like darkness,' she writes.

They never remember to get food for him, so she has to spend her own money to buy it and her hands, they stink badly of the dog and the dog's food, and no matter how much she washes them the dog and the dog's food is all she can smell.

'You know how a dog is,' she writes. 'Restless. And every time he sees me, he jumps and checks my hands, licks them, checks me for food. And I show him my palms, look no food, but what can I do? The dog doesn't speak Polish.'

She approaches the family. Once, twice. The third time she decides to stop. She gives the girls the lead and tells them to take him out for a walk, but they lose the lead and forget the dog. So he stays with *Babcia*, who can't walk him without the lead and all day he's peeing in corners and she chases him with a cloth. She burns the dinner for the first time since she's come to America. Only the following morning does she remember the laundry's done, so she has to do it again, the clothes smell soggy.

She's angry. With the girls for asking for a dog and with the parents for not talking to them about the responsibilities of having a pet. Everyone else is angry with the dog.

He barks for two nights in a row, she can't get any sleep. The following morning, she serves him her breakfast, some ham, a little bread and fried eggs. The dog likes the food and is searching for more. Now *Babcia* is told off for teaching him bad manners.

She says '*A idźcie wy wszyscy pocałujcie mnie gdzieś*' and walks out of the kitchen. It's the first time she's ever walked out on a family. In the evening the woman approaches her. She says, Benia, sit down. She gives her an envelope and talks about resting.

The envelope is in the parcel she sends us. The dog is in the shelter.

There's a boy at school who bites nails like I do, but girls find him attractive.

'It's like he's thinking of something important,' I hear one of them say. He bites his nails in the classroom as he watches Klaudia who's struggling to complete a question in a maths quiz. He hasn't glanced once at his own sheet and when the teacher gets up to collect it, he quickly scribes a few numbers and circles some random answers. He's going to fail again, but the teacher will let him repeat the quiz next week or the week after that. He's one of those boys in our class who manage to pass to the next year, regardless of what he does.

Mama is less attentive to what I eat. The dental clinic requires more energy from her. She comes home in the evening and still in the white uniform hugs me and asks how the school was. I say a few sentences before I lose her attention to something she's suddenly remembered. She nibbles on nuts and dates like a squirrel from the bowl which sits on the living room table, the bowl which seems to refill itself endlessly. She asks if I've eaten, but I don't answer. She's already on the phone, a patient's calling in pain, could she please see him tonight?

She says: This is not why I went private.

She says: This is not how I wanted to live.

But she says yes to the patient and a few moments later she's waving at me from the car's window and I'm waving back from the window of my bedroom and *Tata*'s waving at no-one.

I want to be like boys in my class whose eyes don't avoid others'. I want to be like boys in my class who look forward to P.E. lessons, and if they have to go to the bathroom they don't ask, they announce it even though they still require the teacher's permission. I want to be like boys in my class who return their papers early because one bad mark doesn't define their futures. I want to have the confidence of having a choice like they do.

There's one boy in my class I want to be like more than others, but he doesn't like me. Sometimes our eyes meet and he makes a stupid face at me and other boys see it and laugh. I want to make a stupid face back, but I'll just look ugly.

Ania tells me she's not feeling girly enough. That there are girls in her class who are like *rusalki*, beautiful and graceful, dangerous and malicious. The boys don't see that though, hypnotised by their charm. She draws them in the back of her notebooks, dancing in the water, their hair threaded with seaweed, their eyes glistening in moonlight. Like the boys I'm hypnotised by Ania's *rusalki*. She laughs bitterly when I tell that to her.

'I don't know what it is,' she says. 'What is wrong with us?'

When our parents go to sleep, we sneak to the living room and turn the TV on. We watch it almost on mute, but a few minutes later, I turn it up a little. The voices of actors stay low as if they were sharing some secrets with us. I think of our *mamas*’ childhood, Grandfather locked in the bathroom listening to *Radio Free Europe* and *Babcia* hoovering the immaculate carpet to prevent any sound from escaping their flat. A shiver of excitement runs down my spine. I miss their childhood, ours in comparison is predictable, boring. I wish we could do something like they did. Something illegal, but morally right. To stand up against the oppressive government, to disobey the rules. To have stories to tell.

Ania glances at me.

‘You’re watching this?’

‘I was just thinking how our parents had much more interesting lives than we do.’

‘With curfews? And censorship?’

‘Even so. Because it was tougher to do things, they had to be more creative. Like the whole illegal market of American tapes, or magazines from Germany?’

She nods.

‘Maybe oppression supports creativity, that’s what I’m saying.’

‘Come on, that’s a horrible thing to say. It’s like saying that an artist has to be hungry to be good.’

‘But now that life is easier for them, they fall into these routines. Work-home homework. They’re not as passionate as they used to be.’

‘That’s true. I never want to settle. I’m not going to get married and I’ll never have children.’

‘Me neither.’

‘Maybe if we weren’t here, our parents would have better lives, you know? More fun? But there was no choice before. Everyone got married, everyone had children, it’s just something people did because everyone did it.’

‘I feel like it’s the same still,’ I say. ‘If you told your parents you didn’t want to get married, what would they say?’

Ania chuckles.

‘Maybe not even ‘goodbye’’

‘I wonder if it’s different in the west. In America, does everyone have to?’

‘But you know what our parents would say. That America is a demoralised country.’

We laugh, but the laughter doesn’t bring relief.

‘What would you do if your parents died?’ I ask Ania on a Friday. She’s brought a huge bag with her. She takes a toothbrush out, clothes she’s planning to wear the next day, and the notebook in which she’s always drawing something. She shakes her head. She’s forgotten a towel.

‘I’m an idiot,’ she says.

We have a lot of towels, but I don’t know if they’re fresh. I take them out of the cupboard and smell them, one after another. All of them stink like moth balls.

‘Nothing,’ she answers. ‘What would I supposed to do?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Exactly. Stupid question.’

I think it would be horrible, but I would be free. Everyone would feel sorry for me. I would be a child alcoholic. Home alone I’d drink everything there was left to drink. I’d start with the whiskey *Tata* takes out only on special occasions. I’d go through Bulgarian wines parents get for Christmas. I’d wait a few days before kissing the first sip of *Mama’s* homemade *nalewka*. I’d stay drunk for a week straight, then live my whole life between two states: drunk or getting drunk.

Because of their death, I would know more than others, and I’d stop caring about the school. The teachers would stop bothering me, too. Everyone would watch me with admiration. I have survived such a tragedy.

A moment later I apologise to God for thinking these thoughts and beg him not to kill my parents. I can’t focus on the TV. I pick at my nails even though Ania’s hissing at me.

The Jewish girls don't remember their grandmother. She died before they were born. Same with their grandfather. Their parents however have a lot of friends. Whenever they're invited over, *Babcia* makes a huge meal, serving first *zupa* then main dish then cake. They let her cook whatever she likes, they trust her with everything.

When the husband's invited for an interview for a new job, a prestigious company in the city suburbs, it's *Babcia* who picks the colour of his shirt. They trust her with style. They admire how well she dresses and she laughs that this is what everyone in Poland wears. In the letter she writes, she reveals to us that Americans don't know how to dress. They're rarely elegant and everyone wears sandals. Children run around the neighbourhood in pyjamas, even on Sundays.

She can call us more often now, but she doesn't want to take advantage of the hosts' kindness, so she keeps the conversations short. Sometimes she tells a story which unravels over the next few weeks, and it's like we're the audience of a radio soap opera in which our *Babcia* plays the main role.

Later when we're in my room, I share this comparison to Ania and we laugh that being in Hollywood, *Babcia* could make a career. Then we imagine ourselves as famous actresses.

'I could never with my body,' Ania says. I frown and she hides behind a bitter laughter.

'Don't waste your chances, if you frown like this you'll get wrinkles.'

My forehead relaxes.

'I like your body,' I try to sound laid back, like I don't even care what I mean, but a touch of pink strokes her cheeks.

'Thanks,' she says and a shiver of shyness runs through my body. I want to say something more to her, craving the physical reactions her words provoke in me, but I can't think of anything to say. Instead, I take her face in my hands.

'You're beautiful,' I say.

The Jewish girls are going away and *Babcia's* going with them. They're flying to Miami, Florida to go to Disneyland.

'That's crazy,' Ania says. 'First of all, why would they send their children with *Babcia* who can barely speak any English, and secondly, Disneyland? What? Why can't we go to Disneyland?'

'I know,' I say. 'But maybe her English is better now.'

'Nah, it couldn't get so much better.'

'Why not?'

Ania puts an expert face on. She rubs her lips together.

'Because when you're old you stop learning. Apparently, you can only catch the accent before you're twenty one and when you turn fifty you stop developing new cells, so your brain just picks whatever it needs to learn. And a new language is not on the list.'

'Where did you get that from?'

'There was a show about language.'

'I don't know. It sounds a little one-dimensional to me.'

She shrugs.

'I'm just repeating what I saw.'

There's a girl in my class who saw her grandfather die when she was five. He had a heart attack walking up the stairs and collapsed behind her dropping all the shopping bags and rolling all the way down the staircase. The apples and cabbages followed him down, as if trying to catch him, to save him like he saved them from rotting at the farmer's market.

When the girl saw him fall, she ran to the fourth floor where her grandparents lived and screamed for her grandmother to open the door.

'What are you screaming for? Somebody died?' her grandmother called out approaching the door, and the girl started laughing although there was nothing to laugh about. She couldn't speak and instead she laughed while pointing with her finger at the stairs outside. She hoped her finger could save his life.

A girl in my class loses her grandfather. This is how the other girls put it. She lost her grandfather.

To lose someone is not to know where one is as if he might show up one day like an odd sock, might come back like a cat who was just testing if we cared.

To be lost is to exist in a confused state and wander around unrecognisable places. Not necessarily in danger, but danger's possible. Lost as in, they'll be looking for him for a while before they give up, although some of them might never give up. I wouldn't.

I wonder where they lost him and how. Couldn't they be more careful? Look for him longer? Not leave him where he'd surely get lost? Have they tried looking where they last saw him? Have they tried again? Have they asked around?

'They didn't lose him,' I say to myself. 'He left.'

The girl turns around and casts me a hateful glare. I blush like a country which appeared on a map, suddenly, illegally.

I turn the page of the book I study from, even though I can't focus on a single word. The girl surrounded by friends starts speaking again, but this time in a voice much lower, and every so often she glances at me, the look I can feel without lifting my head. Even though I make no sound, I feel myself growing larger.

The guarding days. I watch Grandfather with suspicion. Is he hiding anything from me? If he coughs or feels tired for no particular reason, a cloud of panic emerges above me and I start seeking for shelter before it breaks open. I turn to my nails, I scratch the skin of my arms, I pinch the skin on my thighs. I grind my teeth which Grandfather notices. He tells me to repeat after him. O, A, E, U, I. He says when he was in the army, his jaw tightened so much he couldn't speak for a week and his friend, rest in peace, told him to do this exercise.

We pronounce these vowels together. O, A, E, U, I and for a moment the cloud disperses.

Christmas comes and we spend it obsessed with English films. We imagine ourselves admiring the city view from the egg of Millennium Wheel, or at dawn, stepping through high grasses of the misty blue landscape in the country's northern parts. We watch the same films over and over again, reciting back lines to each other in any context we find. We practise British accent and drink tea with milk, although we don't realise that not all tea should be topped with milk, so we pour it into the cups of green, fruit-flavoured, and mint.

We beg Ania's *tata* to print out stills from the *Wuthering Heights* and spend the nights sticking them to the walls of our bedrooms. We discover the Beatles. It's like hearing music for the very first time. Our parents laugh at us that we're obsessed but we can tell they view our obsession through the sentimental glass. They push us towards the later songs which have more words, complicated ones I don't yet understand. We discover the place called Liverpool in England and although we're reassured there's nothing interesting there (Ania's parents watched a show, just factories and an airport), it's where the Beatles are from, so it lands on our map. The map which expands as my language expands.

Ania loves the English aesthetics, the costumes, the little village houses and the pale skin of red-haired actresses. For the first time she's happy with how pale her own skin is and gives up on sunbathing forever. She says English men are different from Polish, more sophisticated, elegant. She draws us as heroines of Victorian dramas haunted by ghosts of our lovers.

But for me it's something else.

There is a land so close to us where they speak the language I am sure I was supposed to be born in. By some cosmic mistake I was placed in Poland, but this mistake can be fixed if we move.

We look at our *tatas* differently. We compare them to the men we see in the films. Who is more handsome, more stylish? Who would we fall for if they weren't our fathers?

Ania's *tata* has something of Heathcliff in him, nostalgic eyes and eyebrows, always raised. My *tata* has charisma. He entertains people, reaches for a guitar at any occasion and brings to life long-forgotten songs. Our parents spend a lot of time together during Christmas break, and for the first time we see in them the twenty-year-olds they once used to be.

We like the songs they used to party to as university students. They're often shocked by our musical discoveries and share stories of how a song we now like came to be important in their own lives. We enjoy these stories, and we ask questions that engage our parents in endless debates. They disagree on the details and mock each other for growing too old to remember what they swore in the past never to forget.

To one another we speak mostly in film quotes. Ania's *mama* says nobody will understand us, our language a short cut across the intimate maps we've been drawing throughout our whole lives. And we hope no-one will. We don't need anyone else in the world but each other.

We never sleep. We watch pirated movies we can't find subtitles for, so we've no choice but to trust our own translations. Often, we don't get it right and we watch the same scenes repeatedly, giving them different meaning each time. If we still don't understand what the actors say, we choose what best fits our expectations. When at four we lie down in bed, we talk in the darkness until our faces are lit by the first rays of sun. Sometimes we go to sleep at eight am.

We do everything together. Neither leaves the room on her own and if one needs to pee, we go together, so the flow of our conversation is never interrupted.

I can't recall the time before or after this Christmas break. Sometimes, our parents suggest that maybe you should spend a day on your own, stay a night in your own flats, you can meet again the next day, why does it always have to be a sleepover?

We have million reasons, so it's easy to deliver a new one each time they ask. But as soon as we start, they get tired of us talking, and at the end of the day we win another night.

One evening I'm reading *Wuthering Heights* out loud. In my head I try to translate each sentence into English but focusing on the words I keep losing the plot. When I realise Ania's fallen asleep on my lap, I smile to myself, this moment is perfect.

I put the book to the side and watch Ania, trying to translate this moment into a language only we'll understand. The intonation of her snoring, the vowels her lips shape.

Quiet. The same quietness you experience in a theatre when the curtain raises, sealing the last whispers of the audience close. Ears sharpened. Is this your heartbeat or mine?

I turn to Ania and she turns to me like a mirror reflection. I open my mouth. The words come out.

‘Yes,’ she replies. ‘Forever.’

For the first few days I'm not present. I might hear someone say something about Kasia completely oblivious that they're referring to me. I can't focus. I forget the books, the notebooks, my outfit for P.E. When Friday comes and I fail the first quiz this term, I tell myself it's the beginning of the year, I'll have plenty of chances to prove myself.

The Girl No-One Speaks to offers me protection I begin to appreciate. Nobody looks in our direction, even the teachers are bored with her knowing the answers to all their questions, so they skip our desk when choosing their victims.

Only Klaudia's laughter can bring me back to the room. Unknowingly my head turns. I watch the corners of her lips form into a smile, her eyes brighten. It's January but she's wearing shorts over a pair of black tights. I can't take my eyes off her legs when she walks past, the sway of her hips hypnotises me.

All days I think about Ania. I think how in four years I'll turn eighteen. I'll work in a bookshop or at a bar waiting for her to reach adulthood, so we can leave Poland together. Now that I know she wants it, I can't stop myself from planning our future. During I.T. classes I sneak on the internet to find out what documents we need to move to England.

I read about visas. We need specific ones to work and live abroad, and I start saving up pocket money I get from *Mama*. She has no time to make me sandwiches anymore. She gives me pocket money so I can buy myself lunch from the school shop. She worries I'll be the only person without a homemade meal.

'Everyone does it,' I reassure her.

I can see my body confuses her these days, because she can't remember how much I weighed last time I stood on the doctor's scale. There are more and more patients finding the clinic somehow. My parents laugh that they'll never leave work, a joke which can easily turn into a fight.

I make sure to always eat something when they come back from work. Sometimes I don't eat anything all day so I can have a full meal with them.

Over the weekend, we compare our savings. We have twenty złotych, enough for a Beatles' album. We roll the banknotes and place them in a jar, which we keep in one of the cabinets of the *meblościanka*, between the pages of a book with the most boring title. Ania worries we'll forget where it is. I reassure her we'll never forget.

We lock the doors to *Mamas'* old bedroom and plan our future life.

We write a list of all the things we'll do when we move abroad.

Ania wants to get a house on a hill with a city view. I don't care where we live. There's something romantic about sharing a tired little studio, like French poets we read about at night. They coughed scarlet into elegant handkerchiefs and died in each other's arms.

'Sometimes I want this,' Ania confesses. 'But sometimes I just want to be rich.'

When we move abroad

- Ania will spend all mornings drawing while I write stories for her
- We'll eat late dinners in cool cafes with our friends, other artists
- We'll paint the walls in colours of the sky and write quotes from favourite books on them
- We'll host big parties for people we wish we were like and serve extravagant food on extravagant plates
- We'll travel a lot
- We'll never sleep
- We'll speak only English to one another
- We'll drink expensive alcohol and smoke cheap cigarettes
- Nobody will know we are cousins

Babcia's throat's dry as if she's been speaking all day. I'm holding the phone close to my ear hoping to hear her soundscape. The voices of the girls, their mother calling them to get home for dinner, the wind whistling into her window. Does wind sound different in other languages?

I glance over the shoulder and lower my voice.

'*Babciu*, was it hard to move to America?'

Babcia goes silent.

'To move?' she asks.

'Did you need a lot of money? A visa?'

'Oh, it's different, *Kasiu*, when you go for work. I haven't moved to America, I came to earn money. I would never leave Poland otherwise.'

'But isn't it nice there?'

Babcia's quiet, longer than before. *Mama* glances at me and gestures at the phone. I bring the receiver closer to my ear.

'Oh, *Kasiu*...' *Babcia* starts, her voice softer now. 'I miss you all very much. And Poland, *Kasiu* is a beautiful country, with good people. Remember that.'

'I know, I know,' I murmur, disappointment like tiny insect biting into me.

'I miss you all very much.'

She puts the phone away and gazes out of the window. A blue bird sits on the oak tree, which reminds her of oaks she used to hide in with her younger sister, Gienia, who died shortly after the War. The bird shakes his tiny wings and flies off.

She thinks how her life in America resembles the blue bird's travels. He stays on a branch for merely a minute before moving on to the neighbouring tree. His movements are quick and precise, the words she describes herself in whenever she looks for another job.

She walks away from the window and heads towards the cupboard where they keep a Hoover. Everyone's out today, so she can make as much noise as she needs.

We start preparing for the next sacrament, the Sacrament of Confirmation. At Religion, the priest tells us why it's even more important than the Sacrament of Communion which we all took at the age of nine. The heads of girls under the halo of long hair curled with our *mamas'* hair dryers, white robes tailored for us by the school janitors making extra money on the side. Boys wore the same robes we did but most of them looked mischievous, like robbers dressed up as monks to steal golden rosaries off the church wall.

It was the first time we confessed our sins. We prepared in small groups to practise the lines. Our teacher back then was a laywoman, not a priest, as if being taught by a priest would be wasted on children our age.

For weeks, we memorised the order of our lines, like actors studying a script. First, we'd cross ourselves and tell the priest when we've been to confession last, ensuring we've made atonement assigned in the previous confession. Then we'd recite the sins.

Whenever we practised, the teacher asked us to skip the sins, but some of us would follow the lines automatically revealing the sins we also memorised. The teacher, embarrassed by our innocent conformity let us go on. She became the first person to be the mediator between us and God.

Our sins were all the same. We lied to our parents and let out bad words, we argued, were stubborn, were lazy. We said we would do something we didn't intend doing and did things we weren't supposed to do. We had troubling thoughts, troubling feelings, troubling dreams. We begged for forgiveness and we were forgiven, but the thoughts and the feelings and the dreams never let us go.

Our teacher told us that thoughts were the same as actions in the eyes of God, so I did everything to forget my dreams, the images from which stalked me for days the harder I tried to ignore them. If I turned my head away from a thought, it would slap me on a cheek and I'd turn back involuntarily and gaze straight into its eyes, the eyes of God. Only one solution: to dive deeply and nakedly into our prayers, the sonorous words we didn't understand.

But we did grow up. All of us did, and at the age of fourteen we giggle cheekily at the prospect of another Sacrament. This one, the priest tells us, will allow us to marry another person from a Christian household, the only household our partners can come from. It'll also assert our faith and give evidence to God that we are serious practitioners.

A boy in the back of the room raises his hand with the diplomacy of an interviewer during a political debate. The priest frowns and crosses his arms, then with a shudder of his shoulders bellows the boy to speak.

‘But why does God need any proofs from us? Doesn’t he see everything with his Sauron’s eyes?’

Laughter runs through the classroom like a shiver.

‘Keep laughing, keep laughing and none of you will be allowed into the Sacrament. For the next year you’ll be collecting stamps from me in your notebooks. You need to collect fifteen stamps to be accepted...’

‘Will priest be sending the evidence to God with those stamps?’

‘Or are the stamps the evidence? Where do we collect them?’

‘Collect them all!’

Laughter comes from every desk in the classroom but one. The Girl No-One Speaks to doesn’t lift her head from a notebook where she writes down everything the priest says. Because of this I, too let out a weak chuckle instead of real laughter. The priest sits down by the desk then starts noting something.

‘Is priest writing the letter to God?’ Klaudia’s friend calls out. The priest doesn’t immediately answer. Finally, he looks up at us, quiet, then smiles.

‘A letter to your head teacher. Anyone else want to add their name to it?’

‘Whose names did priest put down?’

‘You’ll find out.’

‘Come on!’ someone cries from the back of the room and as if commanded by the voice, the priest starts writing something again. The whole class tenses in silence.

‘Had enough?’ the priest asks, but nobody replies. ‘Good. You’ll be attending classes in your church, which is of course St Wojciech Church and in each class you’ll be examined from your knowledge of both the Catechism and the Sacraments. You’ll need to attend Christmas and Easter retreats and all Sunday masses. Yes?’

I turn my head to look behind me. The Girl Who Keeps Her Sweets in the Cupboard lowers her arm.

‘What if someone misses the Mass?’

‘They won’t be allowed into the Sacrament.’

‘But...’

‘No exceptions.’

A stream of nervous murmur runs across the desks. Another arm goes up and the priest nods.

‘But what if someone’s ill?’

‘Are you ill?’

The girl shakes her head.

‘Then you don’t have to worry.’

The bell rings and some of us begin to pack their bags, but others wait a little longer. The priest crosses himself and we stand up. We say the prayer, *Ojcie Nasz*, to the Holy Father in Heavens and I speak the words out loud, trying to decipher their meaning, but find no consolation in them we’ve been told we would find.

We get the list of common sins from the priest and we're told to go through them. One by one we read a sin from the list out loud and together we work on expanding its meaning. If the sin is 'speaking untruthfully', we have to name other examples of lying, through actions or thoughts.

The priest asks me what forms of disrespect towards their parents one might show.

'Arguing,' I say recalling the list of sins I made for myself a few years earlier.

'Disobedience.'

'Anyone else?'

'Calling them names?' a boy yells from the back, then he and his friends start coming up with all the names they'd call each other's parents. Your father's a stinky drunk, your mother's a whore. Two minutes later they're kicked out of the classroom, which I imagine was their aim, to leave dressed in cool idontcareness.

As others answer the priest's questions with their own interpretation of different sins, I dive into my personal well of guilt. My sins are not on the list and nobody comes up with similar ones.

I throw away the food *Mama* makes me - the refusal of the gift from God. I starve myself - the rejection of life. I spend hours studying my body, which is shallow and vain. I admire the bones and pray to the idols, the skinny models in *Mama's* magazines.

I wish bad things. I wish my teachers ill, so the lessons get cancelled and we don't have to write another maths test. I wish the priest dies. I said it. I wish him dead. I wish he dies and a different one substitutes him, a kinder, a handsome one. I wish for the handsome priest and I wish he thinks I'm pretty. My heart starts racing when I think these thoughts, which must mean the sin already runs in my bloodstream.

I think of the bodies of the naked women in the changing rooms of the swimming pool we used to go to in winter. And sometimes at night as I'm falling asleep, I let my hand stroke my thighs and up it goes, my fingers sliding inside me, and my body vibrates and I feel the same pressure as I do when I really need to pee. It's impossible to stop my hands, the sinner's hands. The night possesses me. I blame the night.

And then there's Ania.

I bow my head. My hand starts doodling on the margins of the page, decorating the sins with branches and flowers.

Everyone's heard a story of a sinner who wasn't forgiven. Was it a murder? we wonder. Was murder the unforgivable sin? Or was it something else?

A boy in my class says that masturbation is on the list of the Deadly Sins.

'If that's the case, we're all going to hell,' another boy says and everyone laughs. I laugh with them. The word's echoing in my head and for the rest of the day I find myself avoiding everyone's eyes as if they could reveal what I'm thinking about.

It sounds medical, a procedure with predictable results. On the playground after the P.E. lesson, one of the girls asks us what masturbation means and Klaudia nearly chokes from disbelief

'You've never done it?' she asks and the girl frowns.

'Maybe I call it something else. What is it?'

'Oh my God,' Klaudia stands up and throws her backpack over a shoulder. There are still three lessons left, but she decides to skip them. Before she leaves she nominates me with a single look.

'If anyone asks, I got my period.'

Her statement shocks me and she grins in response, exposing her teeth, slightly crooked and perfectly white.

'Bye!' she calls and catwalks down the playground towards the school's gate, unafraid to confront any teachers.

For the next few weeks, boys from the back rows ask us to let them sniff our fingers, and random cries of 'she masturbates!' can be heard at all times.

At first, it's humiliating and we try to change the topic, and even slap their hands whenever they reach for ours. But after a while the word loses its meaning and becomes as tired of us as we get of it.

It's the same in English. I check the dictionary which keeps nothing secret, nothing sacred. I hope that the definition would reveal more about it, how can you tell if you've done it right, and if you can hurt yourself doing it wrong. But the dictionary responds coldly, formally. There's the word in Polish and its English neighbour, different only in the way it ends. *Masturbation*, I whisper and my face flushes red. God, whom I buried returns for this moment and again I'm convinced He exists.

We watch a film about a saint who bled from her wrists. They called her a martyr and her wounds stigmata.

I wonder what it feels like to bleed from my wrists.

Ania's hypnotised by the film.

'It's crazy,' she says when it's over.

'Do you think she did it herself?' I ask. Ania's eyes widen.

'Why?'

'I mean, her life sucked to be honest.'

For the rest of the day, I think about my own wrists. How deep is the skin layer? I pinch myself until my arm's covered with small blueberry bruises. I play a game with myself: how much pain can I endure?

It's getting warm and I wear long sleeves. *Mama* says I wouldn't be cold if I ate more.

Klaudia's talking to the boy everyone has a crush on. He's much shorter than her and looks up when she speaks. He studies her lips and her eyes the same way I do. She smiles at him when he tells her a joke, she plays with her hair. He shifts from foot to foot and smiles down at his feet, he knows it makes him cute in girls' eyes. He speaks in a voice so low, Klaudia has to move closer to hear him better. They're close enough to touch when the bell rings and my view gets obscured by other students entering the room, taking their seats at the desks.

‘I’m worried sometimes.’

I’m reaching for the chocolate milk, my hand stops midway. Ania leans back. The TV’s showing a new music video by a female singer who looks no more than eighteen in a crop top and two ponytails. She pouts her lips with every word she sings. We haven’t changed the channel only because the video’s about to end and we’re hoping to see something we like.

‘I worry we won’t see *Babcia*,’ Ania says.

‘Ever,’ she adds.

I sit back. I turn to look at her, but her eyes are fixated on the screen as if she was talking to herself.

‘Why?’

A wave of heat flushes through me. Does she know something I don’t?

‘You know, she’s there, alone basically, in a strange country, who knows what kind of place she’s in. She’s probably exhausted because you know how she is, she’d never say if something was wrong. And if something happened, how would we find out? Nobody has our number.’

She wipes her eyes with her hand, then leans forward and reaches for the bottle of chocolate milk. I pass it to her.

‘Thanks.’

‘But...’ I realise I don’t know what to say. Ania lowers her head and sobs.

‘And what would Grandfather do if anything happened? He wouldn’t survive.’

My body moves towards her and I take her in my arms. Her face is hot on my shoulder, she chuckles that it’ll be covered in snot.

I hug her tighter. When her hands touch my back a shiver runs through me. She stops sobbing but for a while longer we stay in this embrace, missing the music video we’ve been waiting for all night.

In all the pictures the priest shows us, God is a huge finger pointing at something. It might be pointing at the sky which means we should reflect on our future, hopefully in Heaven, and the good deeds we can do in order to get there. Or it might be pointing to the earth, so we reflect on the transience of our existence, so we remember not to get attached, that we'll one day be buried underground then turn into dust.

God doesn't speak to us anymore. He communicates with the finger which points only in two directions, either up or down.

When we go to the Mass, I lie to my parents that I've been to Confession and I kneel in the row of women and men ready to take in the Body of Christ. When the priest stops in front of me, I open my mouth and he places the *hostia* on my tongue. He moves to the next person and I close my mouth and let the wafer melt like a piece of chocolate and I know I shouldn't treat it like candy, because Jesus died for our sins. I wait a few seconds and make a messy sign of cross with one hand, then stand up to join my parents who nervously check their watches. They need to make sure they arrive before the patient they've scheduled does.

The last days of school and nobody's focused, even the teachers can't be bothered to run the scheduled programme so instead they play some films for us or let us leave fifteen minutes early.

Boys' heads are buzzing like bees with wicked ideas they put into practice as soon as they step outside. They test their strength against the tree trunks and throw plastic bottles of fizzy drinks at each other which often explode as soon as they hit the pavement. Girls who sit on the grass nearby shake their heads and roll their eyes and giggle to each other. They scream in protest when a bottle lands close but do nothing to move further away from the boys.

In one of the classes I decide to try it again. I turn to The Girl No-One Speaks to and ask her what she's doing for holidays. Her eyes are fixed on the small TV screen where a film is playing, some documentary about the Second World War. She frowns, but I can't tell if it's in response to the scene or the question I ask, so I take a small breath and repeat what I've said.

She shrugs.

'Why?' she speaks in a low voice even though nobody's watching the film.

'I was just asking.'

She turns to me and in her eyes I can see nothing but anger.

'Don't talk to me,' she says.

I want to say something, apologise for offending her although I can't think how anything I did was wrong. I'm about to open my mouth when I hear the girls behind me burst out laughing, then one of them mumbles 'don't talk to me' in a voice much lower, harsher and uglier than hers. I feel my face burning, so I lower my head and start doodling something on an empty page of my notebook. I don't look up from it once.

When holidays come, our parents present us with two options of summer camps and we moan in resistance. They're deaf to our complains, refusing to let us spend the holidays in front of the TV even when we promise to live at the allotment.

'You need new experiences,' *Mama* says and Auntie nods. They recall their own summer camps, in Russia, where apart from their small group of Polish girls, everyone else was Russian.

'And our Russian was bad,' Auntie says and they laugh so hard we hope they'll forget about sending us to the camp. But their stories only reassure them that theirs is the best idea.

We pick the place at the lake. The pictures show happy kids our age kayaking and playing badminton.

'Your *mama* used to be an excellent badminton player,' Auntie nudges me in the shoulder, then grabs my arm and squeezes it. 'You eat anything?'

She laughs. *Mama* ignores her but casts me the look which means I'll have to happily eat whatever she makes tonight.

'But why do we have to go?' Ania moans as we leave the living room.

'Really, girls, like spoiled brats. You should be thankful for the opportunity. There are kids who...'

'Yeah, yeah...' we murmur as we walk out.

We share the room with four other girls we instantly befriend. Two of them are sisters. They ask how we know each other.

‘Our parents are best friend,’ Ania says smoothly as if she’s told our story many times in the past. ‘They met on the campus when they were studying.’

‘They’ve known each other for twenty years or something.’

‘We’ve always hang out.’

We tell the same story to everyone else we meet. Soon we don’t have to repeat it, it travels ahead of us told by the people who’ve met us already to people who haven’t yet. I feel anxious the truth will come out at some point, but the excitement of forming a new story for us is even stronger, so I add more details whenever Ania speaks. We tell them we’re moving abroad when we turn eighteen, it’s something we’ve planned for a long time. We have the money and everything, we’ve picked the universities and Ania’s parents know someone who will let a flat for us. Everyone’s impressed with our resourcefulness, by how specific our ambitions are. What starts as a dream shared with whoever listens soon becomes something we discuss whenever we’re alone.

Day three we feel like we’ve always been here. We spend our days swimming in the lake or fooling around in our room with other girls, at night after disco or another event, in the complete darkness playing truth or dare, only turning the light on if a dare requires it.

Our building’s divided into two parts, boys and girls, and to get to the boys you need to cross a bridge. It’s okay to cross it during the day, but at night it’s guarded by one of our caretakers. On nights when Marcin, the caretaker all girls have a crush on, is on guard, he becomes our dare.

‘You need to go there and ask him if he’s single.’

‘No, please!’

‘It’s a dare!’

The events are many and we’re never bored. We learn new skills, songs and games. Ania’s above me on the bunker bed, but on certain nights I join her. The other girls also share beds and we tell each other creepy stories until three am, the hour of the wolf, when we’re too scared to continue. Quickly I become the main storyteller and sometimes girls from the neighbouring rooms manage to sneak into ours to listen. As soon as the sound of approaching footsteps catches our ears, we jump in the closest bed, regardless of a number of girls already in it. Sometimes six of us share the same bed, all giggling with nerves and excitement.

On day four, we're told about the summer camp weddings. Anyone will have a chance to propose in the next two days and on the weekend there'll be a ceremony during which the married couples will wear white robes made of bed sheets and will be taken on a midnight ride in the kayaks decorated with summer flowers. It's a ritual performed at all summer camps and we've already heard about it from a girl in our room who went somewhere else the previous year.

The hall shrieks in horror. One girl boos from the back, another asks if the caretakers participate too, but even though we all burst with laughter, this short burst doesn't kill the collective anxiety.

This announcement alters us.

We no longer play with boys and some of us barely acknowledge their presence. Boys on the other hand won't leave us alone. They make stupid jokes and throw pinecones at us. One of them gets knotted in Ania's hair and our whole room works for hours to remove it.

'Thank God, it's not a chewing gum,' our caretaker says when we complain to him about it. 'We'd have to shave your whole head like we did with the other girl.'

'Ha-ha very funny.' We roll our eyes. Mr Krzysio is a tall guy with long hair and a beard like Jesus Christ. We never catch him in shoes. He teaches us to throw darts, plays the guitar and lets us stay in our room with lights on when he guards the corridor at night. But even he can't explain why the camp weddings exist.

'It's just the thing we do,' he says. 'Come on, girls. It'll be fun.'

We don't stop complaining about the weddings until the next morning when the two sisters are proposed to by two boys a year older than them. The age difference adds to the prestige of their proposal. We try, unsuccessfully to act excited but the sisters don't care either way. They start whispering to each other and giggling stupidly every time one of the boys is within sight. Ania and I mock them for it. We remind them how they were against the camp weddings just a couple of days before.

'We were never against the weddings, just that not everyone should have to take part,' one of them says. They're no longer interested in the scary stories.

'It's kind of childish,' the younger one says.

In the morning they brush their hair, a hundred strokes, and do the same before they go to sleep.

'It's so annoying,' Ania whispers to me when we're alone in the room and I agree with her, although a hand of jealousy squeezes my heart.

With each day more and more couples are formed. We overhear some boys discuss the best ways to ask a girl out. Few of them pass notes in a string of hands until they reach the desired destinations. Others bring flowers picked in the local woods. The popular ones are the laziest. They wait for the girls to catch their eyes, then wink at them which we understand means 'you've been picked.'

Ania and I pretend we don't care.

'I would die of shame probably,' she says. We're sitting on the swings on the top of the hill with two other girls from the room next to ours at our feet. One of them is afraid a boy she finds ugly will ask her out.

We tell her she can refuse but it's like she can't hear us. She's anxious to leave her room and misses the disco pretending she feels sick. Mr Krzysio, our group's caretaker, says it's alright but then he approaches Ania and me to find out if it's because of the weddings.

'It's just so stupid,' Ania says.

'You don't have to be brides if you don't want to,' he says.

'It's not that,' I say then sigh disappointed that he doesn't understand.

The night before the weddings, nobody seems to be sleeping. Even our caretakers give up on scolding us. They only ask us not to be too loud.

In the morning we spot a boy staring at me for a long time, he then turns on his feet and start heading towards us. I gasp. We watch him closing the space between us with every confident step he takes. Ania and I are paralysed in silence. I open my mouth to say hi to him but he turns and walks off a moment before he reaches us.

‘Maybe he freaked out,’ Ania says ‘He might come back.’

A sense of relief mixed with shame stays in my body until the evening. Then the hour comes. The whole camp meets outside the main building. We watch dozens of girls exit through the main door and walk down the path to the lake. They all look stunning, their skins sparkling with glitter, their faces under the spell of make-up. We’re the perfect audience for them, grey and boring in our shorts and t-shirts.

We’ve helped the sisters from our room put flowers in their heads but now they arrive wearing veils made of curtains, and the sheets wrapped around their bodies like ancient robes. They seem to be floating above the ground. They wear no shoes.

The boys appear from the other side, the woods, led by Mr Marcin carrying a torch in hand. They too wear sheets and approach the lake barefoot, but they lack the gracefulness the girl have.

‘What a nightmare,’ someone whispers behind me. I’m mesmerised by the brides and grooms when soft tinkling of water enters my awareness. I turn my eyes to the lake and after a moment, notice lights glimmering in the distance, then recognise them as torches held by the caretakers arriving in kayaks. They’ll all wearing sheets, and their faces are painted like pagan deities. Every so often one stirs the water with a fin of an oar to keep up with the others. Our group stands in a silent trance as the brides and grooms step into kayaks.

Mr Krzysio is the ceremony’s leader. He pronounces each couple a husband and wife and a boy and a girl stare into each other’s eyes repeating words of meaningless poetry our caretakers wrote. But unlike other rhymes they write for us, this verse’s deprived of any humour. The style reminds me of a prayer and I think how in the past I would be guided into calmness by the words so ancient I didn’t understand them, but now they only bring frustration. I completely forget about Ania and I’m startled when her hand brushes mine. I return to myself, reminded I’m not one of the girls in the kayaks.

When the last couple finishes speaking, Mr Krzysio gestures to the other caretakers, the looming silhouettes in the back of the boats. They all raise their oars with the energy of birds lifting their wings to take off for the first time, and a moment later we watch them sail off towards the heart of the lake with the brides and the grooms at their side.

Ania's hand in mine. Some time passes and we shrug off the strangeness of what we've just experienced. Mr Krzysio invites us back to the building. For a moment longer the common room's pitch black, then someone puts on the music and the disco ball starts its methodical dance.

A few songs later, one after the other, bride and groom couples enter the room now wearing their usual clothes. Some of them stay close to each other while others escape into separate groups. One of the sisters spots us. She gives us a wave and we nod at her.

'How was it?' Ania yells over the increasingly loud music. They're playing the song we refuse to dance to.

'Eh, you know...' she yells back looking around. 'We just swam around a bit then came back.'

'You look great!' I shout.

'Thanks!'

With the corner of my eye I can see Ania smirking. More and more people move to the heart of the room, jumping and shaking, shouting louder and louder, and it's like a real heart beating stronger with life. I nudge Ania and her smile lightens.

A few seconds later we're in the crowd, our voices screaming the lyrics of a song, louder than everyone else. We swirl and jump and lift our arms as if to stretch ourselves beyond the building's walls. We're holding our hands and sing to each other, as at this moment the music plays only for us.

The return home is torture. We spend the whole morning hugging each other and promising to meet next year, same place same time. The sisters break up with their sweethearts and it feels like the end of something more important than we can understand. The two other girls from our room write down their addresses and we promise to write.

Everyone's signing everyone else's t-shirts which travel like last words, quickly acknowledged and cherished for what they'll later symbolise.

We hug Mr Krzysio for the last time. He's wearing shoes and his arm is caressing Miss Karolina's back, the caretaker of another group.

When our parents see us, they laugh. *Mamas* recognise their victory in our tears.

'We told you!' they say but we don't reply. We spend the whole journey home weeping silently.

Back in *Mamas*' old bedroom, we put the song from the disco on, the one we always refused to dance to.

'It's not so bad,' Ania mumbles through tears as we rewind it and play it again from the start, and again, and again, and again for the fifteenth time.

The knife, two fingers and a Beatles song. *Sometimes*. I make a cut on my skin, then pass the knife so she can do the same. She hisses when we press the fingers together. It burns but we hold our hands in a grasp until the song ends. I am dizzy with the promise we make. We're going to do it. We're going to move abroad.

I sit next to *The Girl No-One Speaks To* and take a deep breath. In my head, a timer's gone off, shortening the distance between Ania and me. The first class starts, and I disappear into a dream of living in England with her.

America is too Coca-Cola. Too sweet, too white-teethed and chiselled-jawed, too everyone can make it. And we now know that not everyone can.

There is darkness in British songs, permission to have one's heart broken and to never move on. The reason not to take it anymore.

There is anger. Over the summer, we watch *Billy Elliot* and hear the Clash for the first time. There is violence in the way the guitar strings are pulled as if they were hair pulled from the skull. The only band we listen to that isn't British is the Doors, but Uncle tells us that Jim Morrison faked his accent to sound English. He puts on an album by the Rolling Stones and the room fills with bittersweet sounds. I don't know why but my eyes are tearing up. I look at Ania and for some reason, I miss her even though she's right there, next to me, her eyes closed in contemplation.

England is close enough that if anything ever happened, we could be back in Poland in no time. But we don't talk about it. We don't want to croak it out.

When the bell rings, I drop the books into the backpack, throw it over my shoulder, step from my desk when two girls stop to face me.

'Hey,' one of them says. 'Come to the bathrooms with us.'

I've never spoken to either of them. The taller one has big, sensual lips which she now forms into a gentle smile. The other girl shifts from one foot to the other like someone who wants to pee and can't wait much longer.

'Come on,' the girl with the lips says. I have no courage to ask what this is about and find no reason to refuse, so I nod without saying anything, and follow them down the corridor. I expect the other girl to rush into a cubicle as soon as we arrive, but instead, she knocks on the doors to check if they're occupied while the other girl stands in front of me, smiling. I imagine she will use this smile a lot in the future realising the power it has to persuade others to do whatever she wants. Or will she be a doctor and the smile will help her deliver the worst news to her future patients? You have only three weeks to live, she'll say and her patients will nod as if eager to accept an exciting offer.

When her friend joins her, the girl opens her mouth, but at first no words come out. My heart's pounding, my face grows hotter and a sense of fear arises in me. The fear that they'll do something horrible to me, something physical even. I hear about some girls attacking others, a girl from a different class has a bruise on her face because someone

else hit her for flirting with her boyfriend. But I have nothing anyone wants, I try to tell myself.

‘Can we see your ribs?’ the Girl with the Lips asks missing no beat.

‘What?’ I’m sure I must have misheard her. I glance at the other girl, who stands with her arms crossed over chest like a bodyguard.

‘Your ribs,’ the girl repeats. ‘Could we see them?’

‘What for?’

She throws her ponytail over the shoulder as if it was an irritating fly.

‘You are the thinnest. Like a supermodel,’ she says. ‘We’ve never seen a body like yours.’

Her words shock me speechless. I’m ready to take off all my clothes to hear her say them again, but then another thought enters my mind. What if she’s mocking me and if she really thinks I’m skinny, what if I disappoint her? Is my body really that thin? I try to recall what my ribs look like. Will they be enough?

I gaze down at my feet whose size makes me feel self-conscious.

‘Come on,’ the other girl utters. Her throat’s dry and I realise she feels as weird about this as I do. It wasn’t her idea, she probably didn’t even want to come, but did it for her friend.

‘But...’ I start and say nothing more. I can’t come up with the reason to protest.

‘Just the ribs, nothing more,’ the girl says. ‘Please...’

I try to figure out if she means it, but the need to impress her grows stronger in me. I bite the inside of my cheek then with my fingers grip the corners of my t-shirt and lift it up. The smile disappears from the girl’s face. Her mouth drops open.

‘Can I touch?’

And a moment later my ribs become the tracks for her cold fingers. She strokes them as if reading braille, studying every sharp bit, every curve. When I inhale, her fingers find shelter under the arch of my ribs.

‘It’s amazing,’ she says drawing her hand back.

The other girl doesn’t touch me. She looks angry as if by showing my ribs I somehow offended her. I let the t-shirt drop and cover my stomach and as I smooth it down, the Girl with the Lips grasps my hand.

‘Your body’s amazing,’ she says. The smile returns on her face and I smile back.

‘Thanks,’ I mutter.

The moment I say it, the doors open and I jump. Only now do I remember that we're in the school's bathroom. The girls who enter are talking loudly, their conversation punctured with laughter. The Girl with the Lips starts saying something to me, but I no longer hear her. I shoot out and as I run down the corridor, I bump into one of the older girls. She yells at me, but I ignore her. I stop outside the school's main entrance, shocked that my legs have led me this far. I'd rather die than return to the classroom.

I imagine the Girl with the Lips talking to others about what I've just done. I feel sick. I have never skipped a lesson before but now I find myself running towards a bus stop, and jumping on the first bus that arrives.

When I knock on Grandfather's door that day, I'm surprised when Ania opens.

'You okay?' she says, her smile unsure.

'Yeah, yeah,' I avert my eyes as I enter the flat. I don't speak much throughout the dinner and eat very little. Ania doesn't comment on it and Grandfather's busy watching the news.

'You sure you're okay?' she asks me later after she says something I don't catch. I'm lightheaded but in an unpleasant way, as if my body was moved from moment to moment by some force I cannot control. I pat the sofa with my hands, then I lie back and note my breathing. If I act relaxed, I'll relax, I tell myself, a piece of advice taken from *Mamas'* magazine.

'Let me know if there's anything,' Ania eventually says, then from her backpack she picks up a novel from her year's reading list. Her eyes move but she doesn't turn the page for a very long time glancing at me every few moments. When I close my eyes, she sighs.

'I don't get it,' she murmurs.

On our way to the bathroom, the two girls talk nonstop and at first I can't join the conversation. They talk about a show I haven't seen and haven't heard much about. Sometimes my eyes fly over a picture of the actress they mention in *Viva!* or *Gala*, but I don't find her beautiful because her body's fit. I don't like muscles. I feel threatened by them.

'She weighs forty-six, maybe forty-seven, max,' I hear one of the girls say.

'I don't know. To me she must be less.'

'No way! Have you seen Victoria Beckham now? Or Kate Moss? They are less, but not her.'

I glance at the girl to my right. She shakes her head. I look down and up her body. If she'd lost eight kilos, she'd feel much better, wear better clothes, become less dependent on her only friend. The other girl is perfect. I don't have to look at her to know this. I have been studying her body like Ania studies her drawings. I've been watching her during P.E., the thin line of the tendon of her upper arm stretched back before she throws the ball. Her knees are sharp and when she squats, you can see the lumps of her hip bones slightly. When she runs, the skin tenses on her legs, not floppy like the skin on other girls' legs, and when she jumps up and lands back on the ground, nothing wobbles. I know that Klaudia's been watching her too, thinking about introducing her to the cool friends, to hang out in the woods and meet some boys.

'Victoria Beckham's forty-five,' I say. 'I read it in *Gala*.'

I can feel her eyes on me, but I look at her friend instead. She doesn't say anything.

'And how much do you weigh?' The Girl with the Lips says.

Should I tell her the truth? I think for a moment, then start worrying if I stay quiet a second longer, the other girl will accuse me of making things up. I stare down at my shoes.

'Forty-three.'

'No way!'

I shrug.

'That's incredible!' the Girl with the Lips pauses, then catches up with us in a two-step jog. 'Oh my God! How?'

'I think my metabolism's really good,' I say.

'When did you last weigh yourself?' the other girl asks.

'Come on!'

'Yesterday,' I lie.

‘Oh my God, I wish I weighed this little!’

‘It’s not so hard, really,’ the other girl says. ‘You just don’t eat anything, right?’

‘You’re so dramatic! Kasia eats a lot, don’t you?’

My heart sinks.

‘I eat normally,’ I say.

‘I mean, you probably do eat less than an average person, but you look good. You don’t look like you’re starving,’ the Girl with the Lips smiles the smile I’ve learned means absolutely nothing.

‘I eat normally,’ I repeat.

The other girl’s frowning all the way to the bathroom, and I wish this frown never leaves her face and at the age of twenty-eight she looks like she’s thirty-eight because of that frown, and that the Girl with the Lips remains the only friend she’s ever had and for the rest of her life she regrets being mean to me and prays we bump into each other one day, so she could apologise. I wish her that like I’m a witch casting a curse.

In the bathroom the frowning girl frowns around and at this point I decide I hate her. She’s fat and jealous. She doesn’t deserve any friends.

I lift my t-shirt before her eyes finish scanning the bathroom. The Girl with the Lips opens her mouth and I’m relieved to hear no words come out. She’s breathless and I too hold my breath to expose the fullness of my ribcage.

‘Did you lose more weight?’ the fat girl asks.

‘A little,’ I reply but I say it to the Girl with the Lips as I can see now that she understands. I see she knows it’s more than just being skinny, and like me, she has what it takes to get there.

Again I'm awoken from a dream in which everybody dies.

'You were screaming in your sleep,' Ania says. 'What happened?'

I lie to her. I tell her I can't remember and she's too tired to ask more questions. She falls asleep but I stay awake, afraid to be haunted by the same dream again.

I'm being punished, I decide. I'm punished for everything I've become.

I pray but my prayers are inedible leftovers from times I knew how to speak to God. The words more ancient and cold than before, belonging to people who first wrote them down. I question each line and blame them for imposing more guilt onto me. A human was born in sin. Why?

I recall the words of the priest who told us this is exactly how the Devil works. He finds the moment we're jealous or angry or depressed to lure us away from God.

'And as teenagers, you're the most vulnerable,' he says, but it doesn't feel right to dismiss all my reasoning as the symptom of age.

On a Sunday I decide to go to Confession. My parents have patients, so they miss the Mass and it's the first time I go to the church on my own. I walk down the long row of pews from which old people glare at me while whispering rosaries. The Mass will start in half an hour. Everything echoes.

I kneel in front of the wooden window of the Confessional through which I can see the shadow of the priest's face. I lower my eyes. I say the words I've learned by heart. *W imię Ojca i Syna i Ducha Świętego*, In the name of Father, Son and the Holy Ghost. I offended God with the following actions. Then I pause.

I want to tell the priest about how anxious I am that I offended God, but then a thought comes like the first bar of organs. Is there a God? And with the roar of this question, my throat goes dry and I forget everything I've planned to say.

'What are your sins, child?' the priest says and I quickly recite the list I've been carrying with me since my first Communion at the age of nine. And the priest starts replying in a numbing tone, the same words he says every time anyone kneels at the Confessional. He prescribes me the Litany to the Heart of Jesus.

I get up from my knees, walk around the Confessional and kiss the purple tippet which comes out like a tongue from the mouth of a little window in the front. I take a seat in one of the pews but I don't pick up the Prayer Book. Instead, I sit still watching the priest preparing the altar for the Mass, then leave before the organist strikes the first chord.

‘You’ve been acting strange.’

‘How so?’

‘I don’t know. Just not like you usually do.’

‘What does it mean?’

‘You know what it means...God...’

‘Why are you getting frustrated now?’

‘I’m not getting... Can you just tell me what’s happening?’

‘Nothing.’

‘Kasia.’

She stares at me and I hold her gaze. Her lips tremble and I expect her to say something, but she turns around to face the wall. I take a deep breath and I, too turn away from her.

The thing is - I like it. I like when people say I'm skinny. I like when others make big eyes and say they can count ribs on me, learn human anatomy, locate all my organs just by touching my skin. I like them noticing my bones before they look at my face.

I want to be all bones. Nothing else but bones. *Mama* calls me 'a little skeleton' and she says it lovingly, the same way Ania's *Tata* used to call *misiaczek*, little bear, when she was a child.

It's the one thing I don't want to change about my body - bones. It seems like all bones were made equal and under every skin there's a beautiful skeleton which could be exposed if we only put a little work into carving it out. I'm lucky now but I know from *Mamas'* magazines that once I grow older I'll put on weight even if I don't eat more and that it'll be the weight impossible to lose without a strict diet and mad exercise.

But I hate sports. In P.E. classes my body betrays me. The gracious skeleton gives way to awkward muscles which I struggle to control. My limbs go all around the place, my legs trip over each other, and I get a hiccup and a stomach itch three minutes into a long-distance run. The only other girl who struggles as much as I do is The Girl No-One Speaks to, but she finds a way to skip every second class. She has a note from the doctor and there are rumours as to what the note might contain. Some say the strain from exercising can worsen her eyesight to the point of going blind. Others say she gets a nasty rash on her legs and arms and doesn't want to show it. Or maybe it's her periods which get so bad she can barely walk to the gymnasium.

I'm envious of her note and one evening I ask *Mama* if she could write it for me. She's a doctor, which means it doesn't matter what reason she comes up with, the teacher will have to accept it. She bursts out laughing but then realises I'm serious.

'Don't be lazy,' she says. 'Next thing you'll be asking me to save you from maths.'

I don't ask her anymore but before every P.E. class I try to catch the writing on the girl's note, to decipher the reason which frees her from this humiliating torture. But she takes it out of her pocket only a second before she hands it to the teacher. He studies it, each time with the same carefulness, then approves it with a single nod.

There are rumours about P.E. class, rumours which promise that the final grade doesn't count on the diploma and that if you miss it, nothing will actually happen. But these rumours are challenged by rumours so scary they make it impossible to test the other ones. Some girls talk about the exam you'll have to pass if you haven't attended enough P.E. classes. You'll be judged in front of the external committee and if you fail

the exam, you'll be made to repeat the same year again. When I ask the teacher which version is true, he burst out laughing just like *Mama* did.

'Don't be lazy,' he says. 'You might be skinny now, but if you don't work out, you'll be fat like other girls.'

'I don't want to point fingers,' he says while pointing at the fat girls with his eyes.

'I just want this to end already,' you can hear in the changing room as soon as the lesson ends.

I check my ribs at Grandparents' bathroom. I count them. I want all of them visible, every single one, but no matter how deeply I breathe in, I can't make the top two poke out.

We arrive at the Red Church and continue down Lipowa street, completely empty on the second day after Christmas. The long trees are decorated with lights and we stop to admire the tinsels stretched between the buildings.

‘Everyone must have a hungover,’ Ania says.

We continue down the road past the taxi stop. The drivers who lean on their cars look us up and down exhaling cigarette smoke.

‘Perverts,’ Ania murmurs when we’re far enough not to be heard. In the distance, St Magdalene’s Hill remains silent until the New Years’ Eve when high schoolers and university students will ignite it with the biggest party in Białystok. It’s illegal to drink in public but they won’t care and I dream of the time Ania and I will be old and cool enough to join them.

We arrive at my block of flats. There are men sitting on the bench outside, drinking beer and talking about life. *Mama* always complains about them. I tell her she’s being pretentious.

We pass the parking lot and the apartment buildings which were built few years after we’ve moved to this area. Now poorly drawn graffiti climbs ivy-like up their walls. Here we used to play soldiers, eight and seven years old, sneaking behind the bins pretending every passer-by was either an enemy or a spy. There, we used to sit at the bus stop, eat chocolate wafers and lemon ice-cream in summer. Now the shop’s closed, something else has opened in its place, some sort of bank.

‘Sometimes I worry we’ll end up like our parents. Stop doing what we’re doing, stop caring about art, stop being passionate.’

‘No, we won’t.’

‘How do you know?’

‘It doesn’t happen like that.’

‘How does it happen then?’

We stroll across the playground where young teenagers pick up ends of cigarettes older teenagers dropped.

‘I don’t know but I think you can’t just completely change for no reason. It must be a choice.’

‘Like what?’ I ask.

‘I don’t know. That’s why I’m worried.’

I glance at her as we continue walking. Recently we’ve been experimenting with mascara but she’s much better at it than I am. The make-up emphasises her eyelashes,

already long and thick, while I look like I'm desperately trying to prove that I have any at all.

'Especially if we stay here,' Ania continues, blinking knowledgeably. '*Babcia* went to America, saw the world, and we only know one country.'

I take a swift step and stop in front of her. I put my hands on her shoulders.

'We won't stay in Poland. I promise.'

She chuckles as she twists her head.

'You say that now.'

'Ania. I'm serious.'

'Yeah, me too. I just worry sometimes.'

'Sometimes I'm sad for them,' she starts a few minutes later.

'Why?'

'I bet they wished their lives were different. When I listen to them...'

'I just feel like they were completely different people, with different dreams.'

'Yeah, but don't our dreams change?'

'What do you mean?'

I step into a heap of snow. No-one has cleared the streets. We trench for the next minute, then get back onto the cleaner road.

'I don't know how they expect old people to walk through this,' I say.

'Welcome to Poland.'

She chuckles with bitterness.

'But what do you mean that people change dreams?'

When I open my mouth, a cloud of cold air escapes.

'I don't know. Nothing, I guess.'

They celebrate New Year's Eve in a house with a private swimming pool. *Babcia* sits in the shadow watching the Jewish girls jump into the water, then climb out just to jump in again. She's sweating but has no dress for this weather, so she lifts the corners of the one she wears, and holds it above her calves, embarrassed. The air's suffocating and she can't decide if having her mouth open makes it easier to breathe. She can't wait to go back inside but the party's only began and the guests will be arriving for the next few hours. She's promised the girls they could stay up until the midnight fireworks.

When she gets up her vision darkens and for a moment she think she's going to faint. Slowly she walks over to the table where a tanned and tall woman *Babcia* doesn't recognise offers her a glass of champagne. *Babcia* shakes her head no and gestures at the jug of water. The woman laughs and pours *Babcia* a glass. She says something and continues talking while *Babcia* sips on the water as if it was a cup of hot tea. She gazes into the swimming pool's eye and imagines the water devouring her.

The family tells her to take two days off and at first *Babcia* doesn't understand. She asks if they found a new person and they want her to leave the same day. The wife's eyes widen, then she bursts out laughing. She explains again.

'Holidays,' she says.

She pats *Babcia* on the shoulder as she speaks and *Babcia* finds it difficult to focus on the words the wife says.

'But why?' *Babcia* asks and in the husband's eyes she spots a sense of pride. When they don't answer, she accepts the offer.

'Thank you.'

For the next two days she tries to understand what she's done wrong.

Everybody's late. *Mama* finishes her make-up while standing over the kitchen table in her coat and one shoe on. *Tata's* already outside, scraping the ice off the windows. The winter's been hard and at this point it's too cold to hang out outside. Ania and I still do it, but often our conversations are swept by a long current of silence as if our words have frozen when we opened our mouths. Everyone's speaking through clenched jaws.

I get out of the car and run through the building's entry, then slow down at the mouth of the hallway. It's empty and the only sound I can hear is the last shutting of the door somewhere on the second floor.

I stop before my classroom, knock and enter. The teacher looks up and the heads turn, and I say sorry as the teacher lifts her arm dismissively at me. As I take the first step I notice the seat next to the Girl with the Lips is free and she smiles a silent encouragement. When I sit down, she moves her stuff to make space for my books and notebooks. My body tenses, suspicious of this little act of generosity, and I try to persuade it that there's nothing special in her behaviour, an unconditional reflex, she expects nothing in return. Moments later she slides me a note. *Hey, how was your Christmas?* In my head, I say her name. Emilka, the Girl Who Sees Me.

I wait until the teacher picks up the chalk, then scribble a couple of sentences back. I'm not sure what to tell her, what would she like to know? I write that it was great to have snow for Christmas Eve and that everyone ate too much. We write back and forth all throughout biology lesson and I barely take any notes. When the bell rings, Emilka snatches the piece of paper from my hands, lifts her arms in a stretch, and turns towards me.

'Wanna go to the shop?' she asks.

After the fourth class I realise that we'll sit together from now on. For the first time since I've started school, I look around with ease, no longer scared to be caught staring. When someone catches my eyes, I smile and most of the students smile back, while others lift their eyebrows and return to whatever they've been doing, talking to a friend or trying to complete the homework everyone's forgotten about.

Every few moments my eyes stop on Klaudia, who looks better than ever before, new clothes and hair still curled after what must have been the coolest New Years' party. Ania and I spent that night watching films and eating the little of the leftover cake from Christmas, reassuring each other that we wouldn't want to do anything else. People who party are losers, we decided, although as the clock moved towards midnight, we grew

more critical of the films we rented until we turned the TV off and went outside to watch the fireworks only to find out that you couldn't see them from our neighbourhood.

The following day Emilka doesn't leave me for a moment. On our way to the bathroom she tells me more all about her Christmas break, how her *mama* sprained her ankle, and about *Tata* who struggled to kill the carp. She continues to talk about her sister when I realise that I haven't spoken to anyone else, but her all day. Not that I would anyway, I think locating The Girl No-One Speaks to with my gaze. She's standing outside our next classroom, studying the pattern of the floor. I wish I could tell her I don't hate her. That's not why I've moved from my seat. But it's not that she cares.

'Before I met you, I didn't even allow myself to fantasise I could be a supermodel,' Emilka says.

I stop in front of the entrance to the bathroom. The smell of chlorine and bleach hits my nostrils.

'I thought only girls like Klaudia could be supermodels, but now I see it's different. Klaudia is fit but not skinny which means that once she stops cheerleading, and leaves school, she'll just find a husband, have children and lose that body completely and forever. '

She stops next to me but continues to speak.

'But with bodies like ours we get to keep them for the rest of our lives. Anyway, I wouldn't even want to have a child or a husband, would you?'

'Our bodies?' I raise my eyebrows.

'You know, like, skinny, size thirty-six or something.'

'Maybe lower than thirty-six,' I say.

'I don't know if I should live in Hollywood or New York...'

For the whole day she doesn't mention her friend and I assume she went on Christmas holidays with her family like some people do. She'll probably be back after the first wave of quizzes and essays.

'I like your hair,' I say.

Emilka twists the tip of her ponytail, drops it and laughs.

'It's like my family's colour.'

We enter neighbouring cubicles. I close the doors, undo my trousers and lower my pants.

'My *mama* has the same,' her voice amplifies. She starts peeing. 'It's like gold with strawberry tint.'

I finish first, pull my trousers up and walk out of the cubicle. I quickly wash my hands. Emilka walks out a moment later, her head lowered, her fingers busy with a zipper.

‘I don’t like my hair,’ I say casually fishing for a compliment. It’s a new and exciting game.

‘What are you saying! I love your hair!’

And my neck, and my ears, and my hands, and my stomach. I name them in my head. All these compliments she keeps giving me. My guard weakens and I scorn myself for accepting Emilka’s words with such naivety, but I choose to listen to another voice in me, the one growing louder, the one suspecting that she really likes me.

‘It goes so well with the blue.’

A smile like a kiss brushes my face.

I glance down at the clothes I’m wearing. I didn’t even remember what I put on today. It takes me a moment to recognise it’s the blue jumper I got for Christmas.

‘Thanks.’

Emilka stares at me when I speak and I can see she’s very careful about the way each expression rests on her face. When she speaks, her voice is loud and dramatic, she’s drunk from attention I’m giving her. As we walk out of the bathrooms, she doesn’t look ahead so in contrast I must appear anxious to students who pass us, constantly strategizing the best route down the hallway to avoid the boys who leap in front of us from all corners just to see us jump. It’s like an annoying video game. They laugh in my face as I tense my shoulders and slouch my back, but Emilka doesn’t even seem to notice them, busy impressing me.

When we enter our classroom, she moves a chair back for me, then skips around our desk to take a seat by my side. I look across the middle row, all the way to the very first desk where The Girl No-One Speaks to now sits alone. I can barely see the top of her head. Her neck is bent so low over the notebook, she must be studying for a surprise quiz.

‘I bet you prefer it here,’ Emilka says. ‘I used to sit with her.’

I turn my head. Emilka’s face lights up.

‘Oh, she was the worst!’ she cries out and I tremble, certain The Girl No-One Speaks To can hear us.

Emilka giggles and shakes her head.

‘She stank. Sometimes it was really bad,’ she wrinkles her nose. ‘Does she still smell?’

I nod my head as subtly as I can to conceal the straightforward answer.

‘She was sooo needy. If she thought she knew something she wouldn’t let anyone else answer. And, oh God, she would correct you, too!’ Emilka’s eyes narrow when she focuses on the girl, an expression changes her face into someone cruel.

‘If the teacher asked you to the blackboard, and you made a mistake, she would raise her hand and be like, iknowiknow, just mute. But you could see that she wanted it.’

‘I don’t see her speak that much, to be honest,’ I say.

‘Yeah, *now* she doesn’t.’

‘Why not?’

‘Who cares?’

The teacher enters the classroom and as the doors close, a boy’s hand stops it and five more students ram in, red from the cold outside. Klaudia’s among them. They take their seats and Klaudia casts a longer look at the boy.

‘Alright, sheets out,’ says the teacher and Emilka moans along with few other students. She shakes her head, opens a notebook, tears out two sheets of paper, and passes one to me.

Surprised by this casual kindness, I forget to thank her.

The Girl No-One Speaks to straightens herself up and I can see what Emilka was talking about. She’s ready for any questions and proud of being so.

We have ten minutes to work out three long equations, deductions of vectors, and Fahrenheit’s Law, and the whole time Emilka’s writing towards me, her paper nearly touching my elbow, her letters large, straight and clear. I can check her answers easily and I copy most of her test.

The teacher collects our sheets and as she leaves our desk I whisper ‘thank you’ to Emilka and she smiles. The boy grins at the teacher as he hands her his paper, and the teacher’s frown relaxes a little, something maternal in her face. His is the type of charm our teachers notoriously fall for. He’s cute and playful with his self-awareness, and not afraid to give you attention while other boys are too anxious to even look at a girl.

My mind goes back to the times I saw him talking to Klaudia, but then I was only watching her. I was jealous of how the boy played her, but then more impressed the way she played him. Since this class moved together all the way from primary school, I decide Emilka will know everything about him.

While the teacher sits in her chair, the boy drops his pen and it lands next to Klaudia's high-heel shoe. He reaches down and it's just the right angle for him to get a quick glance underneath her skirt. She turns around a moment before he does and slaps him gently on the head. He pretends it hurts, rubs his head and asks her to kiss it better.

Her voice is slightly thinner when she tells him to focus on the physics.

'I want to learn about the physics of your body,' the boy replies and I blush. I lower my head trying to catch what Klaudia whispers to her friend, but suddenly I'm aware of Emilka next to me. With the corner of my eye I check what she's doing. She's oblivious to the row Klaudia sits in as if Klaudia was the most common occurrence. And I'm thankful for that. Emilka's copying everything from the blackboard and I'm sure she'll lend me her notebook later.

It's a sunny and cold March, but underneath the jumper I put on a tight t-shirt which accentuates my ribs. I take the jumper off as soon as I sit next to Emilka. She asks me how I'm not cold but I can tell she's jealous. If she only thought of it first, now she doesn't want to copy me so blatantly, anxious to lose my friendship. It's the subtlest of games, the frivolous lines we feed each other, the casual strokes on the arms. In a single month she's grown physical towards me, touching my hand every time she asks me a question or shares an observation about someone from our class. When we walk to the bathroom together, she tucks her arm underneath mine, a gesture to demonstrate our closeness to the whole world. It's strange at first, but I learn her movements so well that any alternation stings me with anxiety. Has she grown bored of me?

The way to keep her interested is to talk about food, so soon I become an expert in calories intakes. I make my own rules, but I present them to her as if they came from a dozen books on fitness and diets I've supposedly read.

She steals her *mama's* magazines and we study them in the playground behind the school, ignoring the boys who show off their basketball skills. Few metres further Klaudia's practising a cheerleading routine with a group of older girls. I'm trying not to stare at her, my heart's pounding every time I catch a glimpse of her dancing in the corner of my eye. Little jewels of sweat decorate her shoulders, tiny hairs on her full thighs glimmer in the sun.

'Look at her!' Emilka covers her mouth with one hand and with the other she points at the actress who's put on a lot of weight, two photos of her judged against one another. 'I'd kill myself!'

I examine both photos. Even I can tell they're unfairly compared. The thinner one comes from a professional photoshoot while the fat one shows the actress in summer on some yacht, bending down to pick a towel.

'I don't know why people do this to themselves,' Emilka shakes her head and closes the magazine. A young woman smiles at us from the cover, her waist wrapped in a measuring tape like a fashionable belt, as if the model caught herself on a lasso. In the other hand she's holding the rest of the tape suggesting the kilograms she's managed to escape. She used to be that fat! The broad smile on her narrow face attest to her victory over the gluttonous self.

Emilka reaches for her backpack and takes out another magazine. Inside, we find interviews with women whose achievements lie solely in the weight they've lost.

They're between twenty and forty years old, and 'they've been struggling with their weight their whole lives, but finally found a quick and fullproof method which works!'

Emilka's showing me a picture of a woman doing squats.

'I want thighs like that.'

We're paging through the magazine as if we were making orders for the new body shapes. Emilka's more drawn to muscles while I find them crippling, heavy tissue which keeps the body on the ground. I want my body to be light like white petals dropping from the blooming flowers of the apple trees. I want my skin to be transparent, my veins like veins of a leaf, my limbs no thicker than stalks. This is the body which nurtures me with everything I'd need to survive.

Emilka's *mama* doesn't like it when Emilka reads the magazines. She calls it 'eating problems' and says she doesn't want Emilka to lose any more weight.

'During Christmas she made me stand on the scales at the end of each day. She's so stupid. Of course I'll weigh more right after dinner.'

My heart stops.

'The scales would show that?'

'What do you mean?'

'You put so much on, its shows on the scales?'

Emilka turns the page revealing our favourite part, the reviews of products and pills which make you lose weight.

'I mean, not super much but yeah.'

'I want those,' she points at the yellow box with a picture of a pineapple printed on it. 'My *mama* used it once and said she didn't feel hungry at all.'

'That's amazing.'

I dream of a method which would stop me from ever thinking about food again and instead, dance with the measuring tape, to tighten it more each week until it reduces itself to a ring around my waist. I'm engaged to the tape, we'll have a beautiful wedding and my wedding dress will be white like my bones. Instead of food, our guests will be served pure air, odourless and tasteless, and with each bite instead of gaining they'll be losing weight.

Some girls cheer for the boys who've won the match, and the boy grins at Klaudia who's facing them now. She smiles back, but her body turns towards a different boy, one walking towards the playground's exit.

In *Viva! Magazine* I see a photo of a model whose kneecaps could stab. My kneecaps look like everyone else's. All the fat from my body seems to gather in my legs.

Eating less than others is a difficult game. You cannot refuse food, it would draw attention to you and before you know it, you're eating the same portion as everyone else.

You need to show your enjoyment of food. Be ostentatious about it. Compliment the parts of the meal others haven't noticed. The crunchiness of the salad, the thickness of *fasolówka*. If you're approaching food with carefulness, it'll awake suspicion. If you're picky, you'll start to get bigger portions of the one thing you've agreed to eat.

If you must, choose wisely. Watch out for potatoes. They have no flavour so might seem easy to digest, but if you're eat too many, you'll turn into one.

The problem is you want food. Just like those kneecaps.

I'm a regular eater. When it's time for dinner, I'm the first at the table, and I make sure I don't finish last.

If I'm not careful enough, I'll be taken to doctors, placed on scales and judged like meat at the butcher's. The doctor might even say that my weight isn't bad, that girls my age are skinny, they grow tall fast, then suddenly stop and gain fat.

But parents will know better. They'll ask if I want to be like Uncle Kazik, who died of starvation.

Uncle Kazik died of kidney failure because of his drinking, but they only focus on how he stopped eating so he could drink more, stopped eating because he couldn't remember to, stopped eating to save money for vodka.

And I want to tell them that there's a number of calories in vodka that's enough to survive for someone who lives only to drink.

Sometimes I hear parents talk about me. They use expressions like 'drastic measures' and 'radical choices'. They say they might have to send me off to the hospital where I would be monitored. If you don't eat, they say, you'll end up fed through a tube.

I couldn't imagine anything worse. Like a pig in a farm. Without my decision, food going inside me. I won't even have to open my mouth, it would enter me through the veins. I imagine pale pulp blended like baby food, tasteless, deprived of whatever it is that's supposed to make food appealing.

I never tell Ania about these conversations. She wouldn't understand why I can't play their game, just to satisfy them.

'It's easy for you to say because nobody makes you eat.'

'Nobody wants me to eat. If I was like you, they'd be happy.'

I'm fifteen and I don't want to eat anything anymore ever. But I think about food all the time as if food's taken over my mind.

In *Mamas'* magazine we read that an average man thinks about sex every seven seconds. We read this word a dozen times – sex sex sex.

'But how do they test that?' Ania asks.

'Maybe they admit to it themselves.'

'It sounds like some sort of illness.'

I think about food all the time. I wish I did every seven seconds, but I don't even get that much. When Ania asks if I'm hungry, I throw the question back at her.

'I'm asking you.'

'I don't know.'

'You never know.'

I wish I could stop eating, once and forever, but food always wins and it's the real win, with pizza and McDonalds and night filled with sweets.

Grandfather says that once there was no food and I dream those times come back.

I tell Ania about Emilka after she asks me how the school's been, mumbles few words about us sitting together and says how Emilka seems nice. She brings me little gifts sometimes, lets me copy her homework. I tell Ania what I know of Emilka's family. I mention the sister.

'She wants to be an illustrator like you, so she probably has lots of cool materials.'

'I want to paint, not draw,' Ania says coldly.

She says Emilka's weird, seems fixated on me, and I agree with her, mainly through laughter after she starts quoting back to me some conversations I've had with Emilka in which she asked me if I preferred Ania to her. Or the day she came to school dressed like me, grey jumper, blue jeans. She kept laughing and commenting on it during every break, which made me want to run back home and change.

I don't tell Ania that the thing that bothered me most that day was the size tag erect underneath her hair.

Emilka's a size thinner than me.

I feel relieved after telling Ania, but also guilty of having talked behind Emilka's back.

'Remember when we used to spend all the time together when we were kids?' Ania asks with her eyes in the sky. 'I miss that. I hate school. I wish we were born the same year and went to the same class together.'

Everything would be different, it's true. Life I didn't even dare imagine.

'I miss that, too,' I say.

That night my parents order two large pizzas and I eat my half faster than Ania does. It's delicious. We listen to the song *Tata* plays on the guitar and *Mama* tells us how as a child she was so good at hula hoop, she would win competitions. She even stands up and dances a little and I notice her waist is beautifully defined. *Tata* asks us which Beatles' song we like the most and we shout titles over each other, so at the end he plays *Yellow Submarine*, and although it's low on our list of favourite tracks we sing it and when it ends, ask him to play it again. We know all the lyrics.

It's getting late but we grow more awake than tired. When we get to bed, Ania kisses me on the cheek.

'I know it's stupid. But I wish you were a boy.'

The Jewish girls want to spend most of their free time outside, but *Babcia* can't split herself in half, so sometimes they argue with her. She tells them she must do the ironing first, then they can go, but the girls don't care about shirts and skirts. They say *Babcia's* not good anymore. She continues to do her daily chores, but as she irons she thinks about leaving America for the first time. She irons so many clothes that in her dreams she continues to iron. She irons all the shirts in the world, the shirts of the employers from her previous jobs, the shirts of our *tatas* and our great-grandfather, the shirts of Polish partisans and priests.

'I've become a factory,' she writes in a letter, and our parents laugh, but I think how factories are filled with nameless people, easy to exchange.

Then she writes a letter in which she says she wished she was back with us, something she's never said before. The only letter we don't read twice.

Emilka says I can take the magazines home if I bring them back the following day and I promise I'll return them in perfect condition. She kisses me on the cheek and I move away quickly as if stung by mosquito. I hope nobody saw us.

She chuckles and jumps up from her seat. Her high energy starts to frustrate me, but I blame myself for being too quiet, too prim. More and more often I miss the first desk and the Girl No-One Speaks To whose presence was like cool air.

The following day Emilka brings me a heavy stack, she must have left half of the books at home so all these magazines can fit in her backpack. We go to the bathroom together and find an empty cubicle. We lower the toilet's seat, I sit down and I'm about to move to free some space for her when she points at my thighs.

'May I?'

I shrug and she sits on my lap, then reaches down for her backpack to fish out the first issue.

My heart's beating fast and I know she can feel it. She leans back so her body touches mine, her shoulder blades caressing my breasts. I shift every so often hoping the next position will create distance between us, but Emilka finds a new way to bring herself closer.

I can't really focus on the magazines but I don't mind. I know I'll have the whole night when uninterrupted I can read every page ten times.

When the bell rings Emilka doesn't move. She closes the last magazine and sighs. My body stiffens and my heart is a fish about to jump out of an aquarium. I try to swallow to moisten my throat. She turns her head and her body to the right, and my mouth is a moment short of her skin. I breathe slower and a tingling sensation runs through my body.

Emilka moves her face towards mine. She shifts again, gazes into my eyes, then kisses me on the lips.

It's nothing, I keep telling myself as we run down the hallway, her hand holding mine, her voice calling me to hurry up. She's laughing. I'm trying to make myself smile, but I feel sick.

I think about what excuse I can give to be released home early, but I know she'd know it's because of what happened. You have to calm down, I tell myself, focus on something, anything.

I let her talk for the rest of the day, let her wrap her arm around mine and follow me everywhere. Why does it feel like something has changed?

Later at night I'm too scared to take out the magazines, that they'll bring back the memories of the kiss, then laugh to myself darkly that even without them I can't think of anything else. How is it different from the kiss on a cheek she gives me at the end of the day when we say bye to each other? It was so short it shouldn't matter what part of my face she touched.

I take out the first issue of *Fit Magazine*. I leaf through the pages but the content bores me. All muscles and exercises. Neither my body nor hers... I shake the thought away. Since she sat on my lap I keep thinking about what she looks like naked, even though I don't find her attractive.

It's the third magazine that finally works. Inside, a cheerful brunette with deep stare is demonstrating a series of simple exercises you can do, no equipment necessary. You can work your legs out without leaving the sofa, lifting them up, first one then the other. Or you can do squats while brushing your teeth or read lying down with your back to the wall and your legs up. Make sure to tighten your buttocks so your whole body works out while you rest. You can lose so many calories like that.

The middle part is the most important. Here, the amateur models give interviews and talk about their lives, sad and full of complexes, until they lose more weight than they even desired. They used to be shy, and now in the winter issues, they're posing in bikinis.

There's evidence provided: photos from their youth. The woman I'm looking at could be the girl Emilka used to hang out with. She never used to smile because she was fat.

There are photos from university, which the woman quit when she's realised she was studying only because she had no confidence to do what she wanted. She wanted to be famous, but everyone laughed at her because how? Fat and famous? So one day she said *enough!* Had to get a hold of herself. It was a drastic decision and a very difficult one. The model laughs when she recalls how her *babcia* made the best dinners back then, and

her parents sent her large boxes of chocolates. And every chocolate which remained uneaten was like a badge of resistance. She held each chocolate between her fingers and said she didn't need it anymore, begone! Before throwing the whole box away.

Finally, they started noticing her. It was strange to be suddenly attractive in the eyes of men. She was invited for coffees, ice-creams, and dinners, but at first she refused their offers, certain it was some sort of prank, some joke between her university colleagues. Then her girlfriends started telling her how beautiful she looked, but it was when it became impossible to find something among her old clothes which she could fit in, she knew she had transformed.

'My trousers were literally dropping off me before I could pull them all the way up!' she laughs.

Her first shopping trip in her new body was better than all Christmases and birthdays combined. She was standing in the back of a shop, shyly paging through hangers with boring clothes on, when the shop assistant approached her and literally pulled her away and planted her in front of hangers with short skirts and tops she'd never look at before.

'When you have legs like that, it's a sin to hide them!' the shop assistant clapped. The woman, completely red under the heap of clothes, was delegated out to the changing rooms. As she tried the skirts and tops on, she began to feel prettier.

'For the first time in my life I felt I was worth it,' the woman says, tears in her eyes.

The interview ends, but the most important question remains unanswered, the question I would definitely ask her myself.

'Are you planning to lose more weight? Are you losing it now? Show us on the measuring tape, where would you like to be next year?'

I put the magazine away. The interview ends as if the model had reached her aim, but I can see what else can be done, what else can be lost to gain more.

My head is hazy from pages consumed, my thoughts entwined in numbers and body types. I lie on the bed more awake now than I've been in the last few days. I think of Emilka, her fingers lightly touching the skin of my head as she carefully untangles the knots in my hair whenever I come to school having not brushed it. Or her leg nudging mine under our desk when the teacher says something stupid. I think of her pierced earlobes and how her lips move towards mine so she can whisper something mean about girls in front of us. I close my eyes and my mind starts to spin. I'm no longer lying on the bed, but light like a petal fly up.

I return the magazines the next day and she's a little surprised I went through them so quickly. She says she can bring me more, she has plenty, but I say it's alright, got so much out of them, you know I have to put it all into practice.

She frowns and I sink into my notes replying to her questions in single words, head nods or head shakes.

'I've lost three kilos,' she reveals unasked.

I think of every single thing I've eaten in the last week, every single thing I could have survived without.

'Are you okay?'

'Yeah, sorry, just tired.'

'You sure?'

She puts her hand over mine and a shiver like an eel swims down the river of my back. Emilka's fingers push deeper into my skin.

'Let me know if there's anything I can do.'

‘I can tell something’s wrong,’ Ania says. I sigh.

‘Why don’t you tell me?’

‘But there’s nothing to tell.’

She frowns and the grimace resembles Auntie’s. I avert my eyes.

‘Did I do anything wrong?’

‘No.’

‘Then I don’t know.’

I sigh.

‘What do you want me to say? There’s nothing.’

She shrugs. ‘Fine.’

I speak the words in my mind. It’s about *her*, I say and imagine the whole conversation I would have with Ania, how much I’d have to reveal. I realise I’d have to tell her about eating and how Emilka and I hide in the bathroom to go through pages and pages of weight loss advice. She wouldn’t understand.

We haven’t been talking about England at all. We have been watching some films when she stays over but they provoke no conversations about our future lives. Sometimes, I fall asleep before the film is finished, weak from skipping most of my meals that day. Ania tries to wake me up, each time she grows more frustrated. I apologise to her but she doesn’t listen.

‘If you’re too tired to hang out, tell me and I won’t waste my time staying over,’ she says with her eyes glued to the screen.

‘But I didn’t know I’d fall asleep.’

She shrugs and in silence we return to the film until I can’t keep my eyes open any longer.

Emilka isn't here. Three lessons later, another girl asks me where she is. I shrug and she shrugs back and walks off and I hate myself for not taking the opportunity to say more to her. I could compliment her hair, ask her what make-up she uses.

When Emilka doesn't show up on Tuesday, I let myself enjoy the relief I've been restraining. I say hi to the girls who sit behind me and I comment on their earrings.

My vision expands. The class seems wider, longer. I hear everything with new brightness and clarity as if I've resurfaced from the depths of dark water. When the whole class bursts in laughter after a bad student says something stupid, my voice naturally blends with theirs. When Friday comes, the girl behind me pats me on the back to say she likes my jumper. I smile. She says she and four other girls go to the woods sometimes and they think it'd be cool if I joined them. Over the weekend I pray again for the first time. I pray that nothing bad happens to her, but that Emilka never comes back.

We go to the allotment with Grandfather to see which plants survived the winter. Ania takes three books with her.

‘In case you fall asleep,’ she murmurs and I burst out laughing. She peers at me, then her face relaxes. It’s warm outside now and she opens the car’s window. The fresh breeze tickles my face and I can’t stop smiling. I want to grasp her hand and apologise for all those weeks I wasn’t there for us. I can see it now, how I missed the only thing that mattered in life. Her.

I promise to make it up to her and for the whole day I keep her away from the books. We go for a long walk around the allotments discussing how each garden changed in the last few years. We reach the woods where we escaped to as little girls while our parents continued with the barbeque, oblivious to our disappearance. When we came back an hour later, they didn’t even realise we’d been missing. Ania laughs when I remind her of it, but in her eyes I can see tears gathering.

‘I wonder what will happen to the allotment...’ she says.

What will happen when? I want to ask although I know what she’s thinking.

When we get back, Grandfather’s finished counting losses. As usual, only a couple of rows had to be sacrificed. Tomatoes are suicidal it seems, no matter how much he fights to protect them from cold, they find the way to die.

We follow him into the house he’s finished building a couple of years earlier. We don’t take our shoes off. The wooden floor is raw, there will be no end to pulling out splinters if we take only a few steps. Grandfather puts the kettle on and we choose our teas. There’s the black one which seems as old as our parents and a herbal one which tastes like medicine. When we complain, Grandfather hisses at us, then searches the shelf for something else to drink.

‘Why do you keep a hammer in the kitchen?’ Ania says turning the tool in her hand.

‘Never too safe, Aniu,’ Grandfather says. ‘What about cocoa?’

It seems like the evening arrives too early and we ask Grandfather to stay overnight, but he tells us it’s too cold to stay and the house has no heating.

‘We can hug each other warm, please...’ Ania holds her hands in prayer and Grandfather chuckles but won’t be convinced.

We walk together to the bus stop and an hour later we’re back at his flat. We call our parents and they let us stay over. We fall asleep in each other’s arms.

Emilka's back. She's behind the desk already when I arrive but doesn't even glance when I sit next to her. She's busy with homework, I tell myself, although I can see that in her notebook, she's just doodling. I'm about to say something when the teacher enters the room. This is a double lesson without a break and the whole time Emilka doesn't turn once in my direction. In my head I'm designing the perfect apology. I've been a bad friend, selfish, it was just that I was stressed in a new school, I know I should be used to it by now but I've been sitting with The Girl No-One Speaks to, and you know how she is, it's like I haven't really been here at all. But every time I turn to whisper something to her, a sense of resignation comes over me as if I've been struggling to stay above the water for long enough and now decided to let myself drown. Yet every time she takes a deeper breath or shifts in her chair, my body springs back to the surface and I find myself struggling again, anxious for air, thrashing.

She leaves the classroom before I gather my books. I dart out and when I catch up with her, she throws me a look as if we've never spoken before.

'Hey,' I say, breathless. She continues towards the next room ignoring me. I calm my breath. 'Emilka.'

She frowns.

'Everything okay? You weren't here for a while.'

'Yeah. Everything's fine.'

'But...' I speed up to match her pace. 'You weren't here,' I say quieter.

We arrive outside the classroom. She looks around, then drops her backpack on the floor and sits down. I stand for a moment longer deciding what to do. The Girl No-One Speaks to stops by the doors and I move to make space for her. She lifts her head and stares at me as though I've done something to her. I slide down to sit next to Emilka.

Her eyes are fixed on the view ahead, maybe on the girls gathered by the windowsill or the glass behind them.

'What happened?'

She shrugs. For a while I play with the zipper of my backpack. Her face drops in frustration. She turns her head. Her eyes remain cold.

'If you don't want to talk, I get it, I just wish I knew why.'

'Think.'

Her voice grabs me by the throat. I try to recall the events from the week we saw each other last.

'I really don't know.'

‘Then I can’t help you,’ she reaches for her backpack and gets up. As I stand up to join her, Klaudia walks out of the bathrooms, followed by three other girls from our class. One of them has had a perm done and looks like a wet poodle, but her friends keep complimenting her as if they were trying to persuade themselves more than her that they like it. I look up and our eyes meet, Klaudia smiles. She lifts her hand and gives me a small wave. With the corner of my eye I can see Emilka’s face whiten.

‘Hi,’ she says as she strolls past me, ignoring the doors to the classroom and continuing down the hallway, the girls like geese following her blindly.

‘What was that about?’ Emilka’s voice pulls me out of this dreamlike moment. I twist the shoulder of my backpack, then turn to her.

‘Why is Klaudia saying hi to you?’

‘What do you mean? We’re in the class together.’

‘Yeah, but before...’ she shakes her head. ‘Whatever.’

For the rest of the day we don’t speak to each other, but I can see she’s struggling not to ask me more questions about Klaudia. Every so often she opens her mouth like she’s about to say something, but then nothing is said. After four lessons she starts to exchange notes with one of the girls from another desk. The notes travel back and forth ceaselessly and I’m sure they’re talking about me. Whenever Klaudia turns in our direction, my eyes hopelessly seek for hers, but she’s always looking at something else.

It's hard to focus on anything else but Klaudia. I hope she'll approach me again, but as the weekend comes to an end I begin to think the 'hi' was an accident.

Emilka keeps ignoring me and no longer shares her books so if I forget to bring mine, I get punished with bad marks. I bite my nails in the classroom waiting for the lessons to end, staring down at the notes I understand nothing from, stopping my head from lifting every time I hear Klaudia speak.

At the weekend, Ania and I decide to go to the woods. Grandfather doesn't like it.

'Young girls like you, it's inappropriate. What would people think?'

'And what should they think?'

'Grandfather, back in your days everything was different. Times have changed.'

'I don't understand this and don't tolerate this.' He crosses his arms over his chest.

'You don't have to understand it. It's just how it is now.'

Grandfather says he won't change his mind, we can do what we want but he won't support it. I sigh and drop my head. It feels wrong to go out now, but Ania says that he's acting like a child. We hug him goodbye and leave for the woods.

I promise myself to tell her everything. I'll tell her about Emilka and how she's been treating me. Ania'll understand. She'll know what to do.

April battles against the last strikes of winter. At night it snows but in the morning the path's black and muddy and the sun's so bright we can't see each other's faces until we reach the thicker woods. Ania nearly slips a few times. When her foot slides, she grabs my shoulder to drag me down with her. We laugh as I try to shake her off me.

'Jack, come back!' I squeak in a mocked voice of Rose from Titanic as Ania nearly drops onto her knees.

We're blinded again on the Lovers' Hill where the trees move back to make space for the vast field. Dogs run around in circles and bikers sharpen their tires grinding them against the ground. I slouch as we skim past the field to get back on the path and under the trees. My body relaxes only when we can no longer hear the noise.

Pick the right place, the right moment. Don't want to bump into anyone we might recognise.

'This girl...' I start. Ania slows down and I do too even though it makes me nervous, as if shift in pace entailed a serious confession. I'm about to say something more, give Ania Emilka's name when the words stop in my throat held back by an image of the school bathrooms. The ribs I exposed, selling myself to Emilka's hungry eyes. Her touching my skin to feel for the bones. Then, finally her buttocks soft on my lap as she turns her head towards mine.

'Kasia?'

My face's burning and I feel dizzy. I scan the space around us for a log I could sit on but there are only trees, uncut, climbing towards the sky.

'You're okay?'

'Yeah...'

'You don't look okay.'

Ania stops in front of me. Her cold hand touches my face, caresses my cheek. She looks at me with unquestionable trust. I want to drop down on my knees in front of her and beg her for forgiveness.

Instead I stare down at my shoes, bad shoes for this mud.

'Can't you just tell me what's going on?' she says quietly, like a girl approaching a stray kitten. She takes my hand in hers.

I look up.

‘There’s this girl in my class. I was sitting with her, you remember. We were kind of friends I guess, but now she’s acting weird. I don’t know what happened even. She just came back after the weekend and now she’s ignoring me.’

‘What? Oh my God, fuck her.’

Ania’s eyes are certain, protective. A familiar lightness fills me, the same way it does when I don’t eat for the whole day. I can breathe now. The trees seem sparer.

‘Fuck her, Kasia. Who is she anyway?’

‘This girl, Emilka.’

‘I don’t like this name. It’s too...cute, I don’t know, a little girl’s name.’

I let her talk. Her voice dispels the images in my mind as if they were fragments of scary stories I used to tell Ania at night.

‘She’s obsessed with you,’ Ania diagnoses Emilka when we reach the end of the pathway. In front of us the artery of Białystok, the main road connecting our city to villages and small towns. Our eyes land on a drunk zigzagging the street in attempt to reach the off-licence store. The cars halt before him, heads poke out of the windows to let out hogwash of curses. He stops and takes a bow before moving on. He’s the king of this road.

‘And can’t you just sit with someone else?’ Ania asks when the drunk makes it to the other side. With the whole weight of his body he pushes the doors open. We catch a glimpse of hundreds of bottles exhibited on the shelves inside.

‘Everyone’s sitting with someone else already.’

‘Maybe you could switch?’

I’m relieved she hasn’t asked whom I sat with before Emilka.

‘Maybe she’ll move if she hates you?’

This hurts.

‘I didn’t say she hates me,’ I say in hope Ania corrects herself but she doesn’t. Instead she hums like Grandfather when he listens to you but he’s really thinking of something else.

‘I think she’s probably jealous you’re so skinny, don’t you think?’

‘Why would you say that?’

My face grows hot as I try to recall the last hour of our conversation. I carefully picked the details, saving single berries from the basket of mouldy fruit. I didn’t mention the bathroom nor the magazines, although I did say Emilka’s strict with her eating, lied about reasons, something about allergies. Ania must have assumed Emilka was a random girl I sat with at the end of last term and got used to sitting with. She must have thought we spoke as much as I did with others, maybe thought I knew other girls better.

Ania raises her eyebrows.

‘Jesus, Kasia. Every girl wants to look like you.’

My shoulders relax. ‘Not every girl.’

‘What would you do if you were in my place?’ I ask when Ania doesn’t say anything else.

‘I told you. Fuck her.’

I nod. Ania’s right even if she doesn’t know the whole thing. Maybe I could endure the rest of the term sitting with Emilka, ignoring her the way she ignores me. And there

are girls sitting behind us and in front of us, I could say something to them, compliment them. I nod, more to myself than to Ania.

‘You know what *Babcia* always says?’ Ania stops at the crossing. ‘Tomorrow will be a better day.’

Grandfather's telling a silly joke and *Mama* can't stop herself from laughing so we miss the punchline. It's a Sunday and we're at the allotments, the first barbecue of the year. Our *tatas* are tending the meat, poking the pieces with newly bought skewers and turning them around. Auntie tells them off, you're doing it too often, let the meat cook, but they ignore her, what does a woman know.

Grandfather's having wine and when he gets up, *Mama* gets up with him, reaches out with her arms to catch him if he slips. He dismisses her, patters his arms. We laugh. Ania's wiping her eyes, drops her head on my shoulder. I kiss her hair which smells like smoke and freshly watered grass.

Uncle offers us some of his beer and we sip it slowly like priest during the Mass. It's fizzy and for the next few minutes unexpected belches escape our mouths making us laugh even harder.

It's getting late and we hope our parents forget time exists, stay out too long to come back home for a night. We could all sleep over at the house Grandfather's built.

Grandfather asks us to sing a song or recite a poem and when we cry that we're too old for that, he recites a poem from his own childhood. For a moment everyone listens. There's something holy about this moment.

We each get a plate of slightly burned meat.

'Don't mention it to *Tata*,' *Mama* whispers, leaning towards us. We smile. Our *tatas* are so proud they can feed the whole family.

'Can I have some of yours?' Ania asks when she notices I barely touched my food. We exchange plates. The sky's full of stars and at one moment Uncle raises his hand.

'Look! See?' His finger draws a line we all follow with our eyes.

'Make a wish, quick!' Grandfather calls.

My eyes move feverishly across the whole sky as I try to locate the falling star but I miss it.

'That was amazing!' Ania turns to me afterwards. 'Have you seen one before?'

I shake my head. Never.

'What did you wish for?'

I look up at the sky hoping to spot another star. But the stars blink back at me, settled in their places.

'I think if we say out loud it might not happen,' I say.

'Oh my God, you're right!' she laughs. 'But let's tell each other if they come true though.'

The days lengthen and *Mama* allows us to stay out until four. Ania brings her copy of *Jane Eyre* and as we walk down the muddy path, she reads me some fragments she's marked. She's bought the book only a couple of weeks earlier, but it looks like it's been passed on through generations of readers. I've heard those fragments already, when at night she's read them to me as I lay next to her with my eyes closed, imagining us in the misty landscapes.

One day we will be in England. Losing ourselves in the marshes, in the indecipherable air. Moving across the ghostly landscape, we will grow pale and cold, but back at our house we'll put the fire on and read poetry to each other.

This is one version of our life together. There are thousands other ones. I'd take any as long as she's with me. What I'm counting right now are years, but soon it will be months, then days. There's nothing to plan right now, just daydream but I can't wait for the moment we'll book our tickets, pack our bags, and forget where we came from. We'll only speak English to one another. The language in which nothing is forbidden.

We ignore the people we pass and there's more of them than the last time we were here, mostly dog owners and families on their way from the cemetery having cleaned the graves of their dead for the Easter break.

I follow the trail of her voice. I think how in summer we'll spend all days here. We could bring blankets, sit on the Lovers' Hill and watch the smoke of the factories disturb the flock of clouds. I reach for her hand and take it in mine. A small smile lifts the corners of her lips as she finishes the paragraph.

Emilka and I no longer acknowledge each other. I bring my own books, do my own homework and realise I'm not as bad at science as I thought I was. I take a seat next to her trying to forget she's there. It becomes harder when she buys her first perfume, even harder when she loses more weight. I lift my head when she enters the classroom one day, absentmindedly following my nose, and I can see her whole body, longer and thinner, her bony knees and her sharp ankles. She's wearing black tights and a short jeans skirt and some boys stare at her as she walks towards our desk. A girl who sits in front of us turns around to say she likes Emilka's style and Emilka tucks her hair behind her ears revealing star shaped earrings.

'Thanks,' she says in a new voice, gentle, slower. Next to her I feel heavy. I shift in the chair.

When I exit the school building at the end of the day I see Emilka with two girls from the desk in front of ours disappearing together into the woods.

I don't like anything I try on, but Ania brings me another pair of trousers.

'But haven't we seen them already?'

'They're different.'

I stand in front of the mirror and pull my trousers down. For a while I analyse my legs again. The light's merciless, it exposes every single vein on the back of my thighs. Have my stretch marks gone deeper? The doctor said it's from growing too fast, my skin didn't catch up with muscles. Is there a surgery I can get to make my calves skinnier? I think of Grandfather's side, his legs *Mama* and I inherited. Why were Ania and Auntie spared?

When the curtain moves and Ania's hand appears with another pair, I pull it on as quickly as I can. I turn around. My butt's so sad, I sigh.

'Can I see?'

I pull the curtain open and step out. Ania takes a few steps back to see me from the distance. She tilts her head as I turn around, my arms stretched out.

'What do you think?' I walk over to her.

'I don't know,' she says. 'Something's wrong with the back. I think your butt is maybe too skinny for them? If you had more fat...'

I drop my head.

'It's not easy to find good clothes,' she says. 'But we'll find something. Don't give up.'

'I just hate everything right now.'

'Come on, don't be so grumpy,' she smiles pushing me back into the changing room.

I return to school in a skirt shorter than Emilka's. Ania explains to me that it's the best way to redirect attention from my calves and draw it to what she agrees are the stronger parts of my body, my thighs and my waist. After clothes shopping, we spend the leftover money on sweets. I'm struggling with every bite of chocolate stalked by the revelations of the changing room lights.

At school I avoid all eyes. I rush to my seat and don't leave during the break unless we need to change the room. Emilka notices my legs as soon as she walks in. She glares at me as if I've stripped her off her own clothes and put them on in front of the whole class. Then Klaudia arrives taking a seat in the row to my right. She's the only girl who moves around the room with ease, choosing to share a desk with whomever she wants depending on her current mood. A few moments after I hear her zip her backpack, a note drops on my desk thrown from behind.

'I like your skirt,' it says. My heart stops and I turn around. Klaudia tilts her head, a streak of black curly hair flows down her shoulder. She glances up at me and smiles.

She thinks about Alina. She thinks of the mornings they got into a van to be taken to another care home. Afterwards they picked her up and gave her money. She knew there was more, but she didn't ask. Old people were too ill to speak, and the nurses pretended not to see her, so she didn't learn any new English words while she worked at the care home. *Babcia* was the only one who could speak to them and sometimes they brought her water and cookies. She'd have a bite, then wrap the rest of the cookie in a newspaper. Sometimes the men checked their pockets before they got in the van. At first, she thought they were checking them for watches, rings, or anything else they might have stolen, but then she realised it was knives found in the kitchen or shards of broken glass the women could use to fight them. She'd hide half of a cookie in her bra like she did her money.

On the TV screen two girls are walking down the school's corridor, one explaining something to the other one, and *Babcia* thinks about us. The Jewish girls watch this show every afternoon and *Babcia* wonders what shows we watch. Maybe it's the same one our *mamas* used to like, the black and white show about a group of kids who spent holidays in a haunted castle?

The Jewish girls want to watch TV all day but *Babcia* reminds them they have homework to do. While they study, she prepares the dinner. They can ask her some questions now in perfect Polish and sometimes it takes *Babcia* a moment to find herself back in the right language. The longer she stays in America, the tougher transitions become. Her mind finds itself empty for a split second, unable to grab onto any word in any language, but instead of making her anxious, this experience calms her down. She wishes she could stay in this wordless moment a little longer.

She knows this house well. She's seen the girls' bedroom change. First the pink is removed from the walls and she helps them paint it green and blue. If before girls shared everything, now they are desperate to prove different from one another. If one girl says yes, the other has to say no, even though *Babcia* knows she'd say yes if they were asked in a different order. Then the bed is given to a neighbour who has two girls herself, and in its place two thinner beds are placed by opposing walls. There are arguments about which girl will sleep in which bed, but at the end everyone gets tired, and it's agreed that the girls will take turns. *Babcia* mediates the conversations. Having two daughters herself she's seen as an expert, and her advice - even if not fully comprehended - is accepted without any questions. She is happy she can help, but also tired of helping, tired in a new way, her body performing everyday chores but the mind leaving somewhere.

She's been daydreaming a lot, something her *mama*, our great-grandmother, always scolded her for because if *Babcia* doesn't focus she will feed cows with milk and pour water to a morning coffee cup. She can hear *Mama's* voice now and she smiles, then scolds herself. *Focus, Benia*. She wipes the dining table again unsure if this is the task she's only started or is about to finish now. She cleans the table every day and can't tell if it's dirty or not.

She tells the girls about us. She tells them, I have two granddaughters just like you, in Poland and they cry, *Babciu*, you already told us about them. *Babcia* nods waiting for them to finish speaking, she continues as if they haven't protested. I have two granddaughters like you, in Poland, and they go to school and study hard and they'll have great jobs when they grow up. One speaks English beautifully, the other's an artist, she can draw everything.

Babcia doesn't notice when English words give way to Polish. She doesn't realise that she no longer speaks about us, but of her own sisters. How they grew up in the village before the War when everything was perfect.

The girls listen with their mouths open, hypnotised by the melody of the foreign language who they observe like a wild animal finding shelter in their garden.

Later that night *Babcia's* visited by the ghost of her mother who doesn't say anything just stands in the corner of *Babcia's* tiny bedroom.

The following day she calls us. She asks if everything's fine, if everyone's healthy. Grandfather reassures her that nothing's happened, but *Babcia* doesn't believe him. She asks him to pass the phone to our *mamas* and when they confirm Grandfather's words, she begs *Tata* to tell her the truth.

'Kasiu, how are you?' she asks me when the phone finds my ear.

'Everything's okay, *Babciu*,' I repeat after my family.

'*Babcia* believes her ghosts more than us,' *Mama* says afterwards.

6

Fat Eva sees everything the other way round. She says, *if you look at it from this angle, and, it could be both ways, look*. And unsure where she wants me to place my gaze I rest it on her face.

She has the wisdom of experience. We've tried beer before, a sip or two from our parents' glasses, but Fat Eva's been drunk. She even took some pills.

'I don't know what they were,' she says and on the first day already everyone knows what she's done. It's like a story everyone's read called "Eva and the Unknown Pills".

'They can't be that bad, my grandfather takes them,' she says when the story circles back to her.

'But if he died...' I say. 'They could blame it on his age.'

'That's fucked up,' Ania mutters.

Someone says she got high and had hallucinations.

'I wish,' Eva chuckles.

At that point we're inseparable. We wake up at the same time and head to the bathrooms carrying each other's towels and cosmetic bags. When at the breakfast table we find only one block of cream cheese, we divide it between the three of us, even though the amount each is left with isn't enough for half a sandwich. Sometimes the caretakers laugh and call us the same name. One day we'll be three Evas, the other three Kasias.

'Ha-ha, very funny,' we roll our eyes and shake our heads, but we're flattered to be seen as a gang.

Fat Eva's hair is the colour of sunflower petals and her blood is sweet, which means her skin's red and itchy and covered in mosquito bites. It's the second time she's been to a summer camp. Before last year her brothers were too young and she had to take care of them. Her *mama* must be working all day like mine does.

We find out she lives in Białystok.

'Yeah, I know the woods,' she says when we tell her where we've been hanging out recently, although soon we learn that she knows most of Białystok well. She's been going on a bus on her own since she's turned five or six.

'*Mama's* from the village, you know how they bring them up there.'

'I wish I could be so brave,' Ania says dreamily when we lie in our beds on the fourth night of the camp.

We're thrilled to discover that nothing's changed and that even the same caretakers returned. Mr Krzysio and Miss Karolina are now holding hands and he's wearing shoes but still has long hair. There are some faces we recognise but didn't grow close to last year, probably didn't exchange more than five words. But we want to hug every single person even before we introduce ourselves.

We share a room with three other girls and Fat Eva's one of them. Ania and I take the bunk bed and Eva takes the bed next to Ania's, the top of their heads meeting at the same plank of wood.

'I'm Eva,' she shakes everyone's hand. Her grip is tight, like our grandfather's.

Fat Eva says yes to everything we suggest, and this year we want to do more things than the year before. She likes competitions and she's good at badminton, so she plays with whoever asks her to play. Younger boys ask her to teach them a few tricks, then use them against older boys to win. We watch their match gorging on bags of crisps. We lick our fingers and raise our hands booing the losing team.

Fat Eva loves kayaking, she says, even though she's only done it once and she remembers nothing from the trip. Ania gets in the kayak with me and Eva shares one with a girl everyone calls Salmonella, because apparently she's had it just before she arrived. As we try to stop our kayak from wobbling uncontrollably, Fat Eva gives us a goodbye wave and we watch her dart to the centre of the lake. The other girl's barely moving her oar.

When Ania decides she won't swim, Fat Eva crosses her arms over her chest like an impatient parent.

'Come on,' she stands in front of Ania on the little isle we've arrived at as a group. The boys have jumped back into the water as soon as they parked their kayaks.

'But I don't want to.'

'Why not?'

Ania peers at her as though no words are needed. Eva nods.

'And what can they say? That you're fat?'

Ania blushes.

'So what?' Fat Eva drops her arms by her sides and squats to level with Ania who's sat on the towel under a tree. 'They'll talk then they won't. You know how it is.'

Ania shakes her head, then gets up and turns her back to us.

'Come on, don't look!' She slouches as she pulls her shorts down revealing the bottom of a swimming suit. Fat Eva smiles.

'Done,' Ania says. She picks up a towel and walks to the kayak to leave it there. I rush out of my clothes and Eva does the same. Underneath she's wearing her bra and pants. I expect her to ask me to hold a towel for her, so she can change into a swimming suit, but instead she twists around on her feet and shoots towards water. Ania and I watch her with our mouths open as she waves at us and cries to join her.

Disco starts at eight and we're exhausted having spent all day at the lake. At first Ania refused to do anything more than lie on the water, but we ended up jumping off the tree branches into the lake whenever Mr Krzysio wasn't looking. Never before have I jumped from any height, so I walk towards our building as though I've conquered all fears. I keep my eyes straight ahead and smile at the girls and boys who pass us. One of them has spiky, white hair and he smiles back at me exposing a gap between his teeth. Ania finds it cute and Eva and I mock her for it.

'It gives him more character,' she says hiding her face in a t-shirt.

We're getting ready for tonight's disco trying on different outfits and giving each other suggestions as to how to make them more special. We all have shorts and t-shirts and only one girl brought a dress with her, but the other opens her suitcase and takes out a tray of different eye shadows. Her *mama* allows her to paint her eyes in summer, she says.

Only Eva doesn't change from her clothes, but she ties her hair in a bunch of playful buns. Her fingers move quickly and she needs no mirror to get them right.

We ask her to do our hair.

'I've practised on my brothers when they were that little,' she says, her open-palmed hand hovering at the height of the bed. She asks us how many pins and hair bands we have and we rush into frantic search, diving under the beds and emptying our backpacks. But even with a single hair band she can copy the hairstyles we find in magazines.

'I'm so pathetic, I can't do anything,' says Ania. She's trying to catch her reflection in the mirror we've stolen from the communal bathrooms. We move behind her, a moon orbiting the planet of her head. In her hand, she's holding a pocket mirror Ewa gave her.

'Left, more more,' she directs us then 'stop!' as she catches the glimpse of what the back of her head looks like.

We stand over Fat Eva as she arranges the streaks of Ania's hair.

'Shoosh!' she points with her chin for us to move back when she realises we're blocking the light. The music starts playing downstairs, and our hearts jump. We're still cool. At the start of the disco nobody dances and they don't even turn off the lights, but within seconds the hallway gets busier. Outside you can still hear players shouting as the badminton racket disappears into the pine trees, and the last group coming back from a bike ride. The music gets louder muting the chirping of the birds. The air brings in the smell of seaweed like a message from the lake and I breathe it in.

'Next!'

Our hands raise above Ania's head like mist as she gets up.

'Don't pick!' Ania slaps our fingers gently as she walks over to the mirror nailed to the inside of our doors.

'Wow!' she moves closer. I stand next to her admiring the hairstyle, and Eva's already placing a new pin between her teeth.

Only as we stop by the entrance to the Communal Room to check on each other one last time, I start to feel nervous.

Ania asks me if her face looks okay and I examine it for mascara or lipstick smear.

‘You look perfect.’

She’s wearing clothes she bought last week in Białystok. She’s grown out of all of her shorts and t-shirts, and now she chooses swimsuits with less certainty. She’s been growing taller steadily while I suspect I’ve stopped growing altogether. Some boys in my class have exceeded my height and Klaudia, too might be taller than me although her feet are always in high heels. Even the soles of her trainers are lifted slightly.

Ania’s blesses each of us with a mist of a strawberry body spray, and as we enter the room, the sweetness mingles with the sourness of sweat. Most boys didn’t take a shower before coming here while girls bathed themselves in all perfumes they could get their hands on. The DJ’s playing a song we don’t like but it’s catchy and impossible to ignore so between words, we start singing to ourselves.

The Boy with White Hair is dancing with a girl much taller than him. Her main move is waving her arms in circles above her head while her legs are self-consciously bent. He’s dancing in minuscule squats as if his legs were springs. Ania bursts out laughing. She hasn’t looked at anyone but the Boy with White Hair since we’ve found a place to stand.

Eva fixes her shoulder strap, her white t-shirt’s glistening in the disco ball light, and now I regret not wearing white myself. A few people comment on the light she’s emanating, and she laughs each time surprised as if she hasn’t noticed herself.

‘Come on!’ Eva grabs my hand, I reach for Ania’s, and a moment later we’re skipping to the verses we barely know. By the chorus though, we’re in the middle of a circle of girls and boys, jumping and singing our hearts out. When the song ends, we escape the crowd breathless. We walk out onto the hallway to get some water from the dining room, and as I grab the door handle to pull it open I hear a murmur behind me. I turn around. The Boy with White Hair is speaking to Ania who’s red from dancing and shyness. My throat goes so dry it hurts. I wait a little longer thinking maybe she wants me to save her from the boy, but when she starts speaking to him I realise she’s enjoying his attention. To stop myself from thinking, I turn around and walk through the door, and a moment later the doors open and Ania flits in.

She exhales and inhales loudly with a big smile on her face. One hand on a hip, she walks over to the table with a large jug of water. I pass her a cup.

‘Thanks.’

I wait for her to mention the boy, but after she downs the water in one gulp, she turns around and starts towards the exit.

We call him names and Ania cries at us to stop, throwing random small items she grabs thoughtlessly with her hand.

‘Come on!’ she cries hiding her face in her t-shirt and giggling into it.

One evening I return to our room from the bathroom to find Ania and Fat Eva sitting on the terrace, eating *paluszki* and discussing boys. I stand behind them for a moment, then Ania moves the chair for me and I sit next to her.

Ania’s eyes trace the line of the lake as if palm reading the future of the summer camp. Fat Eva picks a dozen *paluszki* and eats them all in one go. She offers me some, but I wave my hand no.

‘Some girls don’t even have to think about it,’ Ania says. ‘They’re just naturally...you know... they have This Something. I don’t even know what it is.’

‘Everything’s confidence,’ Fat Eva preaches.

‘Oh, Eva, come on. If you’re ugly, confidence won’t help.’

‘I’ve seen many hot guys dating ugly girls.’

Ania’s gaze drops to her lap. She brushes some crumbs off her shorts.

‘I don’t know. Maybe as you age, but right now it’s pretty straightforward.’

She doesn't tell us what he said, claims she doesn't remember exactly and would hate to misquote him, but afterwards she dances with him, her head tilted over his shoulder, she's too anxious to let it rest. His hands caress the bottom of her back and the rest of our room watches them like Morality Police. When the song ends, she steps back and he holds her for a moment longer before letting her go. She returns to us giggling like stupid. She dances more than ever to every song they play, her face glistening with sweat under the disco ball. I watch her move and I try to stretch this moment in time as if I could embrace her with my eyes and never let go.

Ania's too shy to swim in the lake again and this time Fat Eva doesn't try to persuade her. When we step in the water she says that she gets it. The boys are throwing ball between one another and we swim further away until our heads are safe.

'She really likes him,' Eva says when we turn to face the beach. Ania's sitting on the towel with a book she hasn't progressed in since we've arrived. It's her cover up for watching the boy, who during the day ignores her, but at night won't leave her until the caretakers kick him out of our room. It's fun because he brings other boys with him and we sit together on the terrace talking about everything. One of his friends keeps staring at me and I make sure to ignore him completely, never even exchanging looks when we laugh at something together. Whenever a slow song plays at the disco, I hide behind the other girls or leave to get a glass of water. But I'd rather stay and watch Ania dance with the white-haired boy even though it breaks my heart to see her so happy.

The boys stop coming the day they announce the camp weddings. Again, something between us all changes. Younger boys no longer ask Eva to show them her badminton skills and we keep in groups guarding our little terrains. We take over the swings even though we only use them as chairs, our feet never lifting off the ground. Fat Eva's attempting the biggest balloon with her chewing gum when in the distance we spot the Boy with White Hair, looking around as if searching for something.

'It's him,' Eva says even though she doesn't need to direct anyone's attention. All of our eyes are already on him. Ania's trying to keep her cool as though she doesn't care that he's there. The boy looks up at us and waves. Fat Eva waves back but Ania's head drops and she curls her toes in the sand.

'Come on, Ania. He's obviously waving 'cause he knows you're here.'

Ania blushes. She doesn't lift her head. With increasing momentum, she pushes herself gently back and forth, her toes sunk in the sand.

The boy starts towards us. I want to grab her by the hand and run away to our room. Or jump into a kayak and paddle to the furthest isle. Fat Eva hops off the swing and takes a couple of steps towards him.

He arrives with blisters on his pale shoulders and a thousand more freckles than the previous day. He slows down as he gets closer to Ania, who slides off the swing and stands next to me.

'Hey,' Fat Eva greets him and he responds with a head nod followed by a silly joke I don't catch, too focused on Ania's reactions. I want the boy to leave, but he asks Ania if he could talk to her in private and Fat Eva and two other girls who are with us make a

howling sound as though it's a mystery but there's no mystery in it. We all know what he's going to ask. Ania begs us to stop as she walks away with him and we wait for a moment in silence, then the three girls go back to some conversation we've been engaged in before he arrived, but I cannot recall what it was about. I don't notice when my toes dig themselves little graves under my feet.

It takes him two days to break her heart. Nobody tells her they said so because it's something nobody could have predicted. We're more shocked than she is.

We sit on the bed sheltering Ania from all sides. She can't smell anything apart from our clothes and our skins nor can she see anything but the darkness we've nurtured around her. She cries so hard every so often a stranger's head pokes into our room to ask if everything's okay.

Mr Krzysio is called, but he has nothing to say to make Ania feel better and we're allowed to stay with her missing the whole wedding ceremony although even if we weren't allowed, we'd never leave Ania alone, I mean, look at her.

'It's because I'm fat,' Ania utters when she manages to catch some breath, and there's nothing we can say to persuade her otherwise. She believes the boy's changed his mind the moment she found the courage to swim in the lake again, this time already in her swimming suit (so as not to draw attention when changing on the beach). She's stepped into the water and the water was cold so she didn't get in immediately, and that's when he saw her and realised how ugly she was.

'But that's crazy, Ania. You're not fat,' I say.

'I look like a sausage,' she wails.

Two days earlier the boy approached her to ask if she'd be his bride. She immediately agreed and we cheered for her, and the next few hours were the best in Ania's summer camp life. She stopped laughing loudly, stopped playing table tennis, and mostly just gathered flowers Fat Eva slid between the streaks of her hair. She walked slowly and cautiously as if the path was covered in glass. She didn't want to do anything that could make her look stupid.

Two evenings later, the boy approached her again and in a serious voice took back the proposal.

'He can't do it!' we yelled, letting the demons of our outrage rampage through the room.

'He can do what he wants.' Fat Eva said wisely, then explained that this was exactly what boys always did.

For the rest of the week, Ania's like a ghost of the summer camp haunting less occupied spaces. She leaves our room for breakfasts and dinners, but during suppers she stares into her plate as if it could come up with the answer to the most painful question. Why did the boy change his mind?

We find out later that he proposed to another girl, but apparently did so because of a bet, so we try to explain to Ania that maybe she was part of it, as well. But it only makes it worse. She's become the game for boys to play, and it's like she's always suspected, she's worthless and nobody'll ever love her.

One evening Mr Krzysio brings his guitar and plays her a break-up song he wrote when his first girlfriend left him for someone else. We sing the lyrics with him, putting all the energy into a single swear word, and it makes us feel giddy and free. After a while, even Ania can't resist it. The girls from other rooms join us and nobody wants to go downstairs for the evening event, but Mr Krzysio has no choice, and persuades us and Ania to do it for him. He'd feel better knowing we had fun.

Ania tells us she'll never fall in love again, but Fat Eva explains that as long as Ania suffers she's still in love with the boy.

'It's like an illness,' she says. 'Your brain doesn't work right. It needs time to recover.'

'It needs space.' A girl from a different room pops by to share some knowledge.

Another girl comes to give Ania a hug and soon our room fills with girls with their own stories of heartbreaks and betrayals. Our conversation stops for a moment when the first sounds of the disco reach our floor. I nudge Ania in the shoulder.

'What do you think?'

She turns to me, looks into my eyes and smiles faintly.

'Let's go.'

We return to our room six hours later soaked after midnight swim in the lake. We go with some girls and boys our age after the caretakers put younger kids to sleep. We take our clothes off and swim in our underwear and Ania and I race to the tree whose branches linger over the water. We climb it and holding each other's hands jump into the lake. Big splash. Everyone cheers us when we resurface.

Later, back in our room, she puts her hand over mine as I grab the ladder to climb up to my bed.

'Thank you for this,' she says and kisses me on the cheek. I want to say something but Eva beats me to it.

'He's an asshole!' she yells from her bed and two other girls howl back in response.

Everyone's asleep apart from us, and after we murmur to each other for a while, Ania decides to move to my bed. It's our last night. We can't believe how quickly time has passed again.

'I'm dreading the morning,' Ania says.

'Hey,' she says quieter after a while. 'What do you think it feels like?'

'What?'

'To kiss.'

'Hmm...I think...I don't know. Warm?'

'Warm?' Ania chuckles. 'But something more?'

'I think...'

For a long time we lie next to each other in complete darkness and I listen to other girls' snoring in their sleep. Then suddenly overcome with courage, I turn to Ania and put my hand on her cheek, moving her face closer to mine. I can see she's surprised, but she smiles and shifts towards me, places her hand on my hip and I do the same. Our faces nearly touch, her breath on my skin, her skin hot under my fingers.

We start to kiss very slowly as though we wanted to determine exactly what it feels like. I smile to myself when it gets warm and I can tell her lips lift in a smile, too. We kiss a little faster, with a little more confidence now and at some point it becomes impossible to imagine that we could ever stop. It's the footsteps in the corridor that make us pull back. My heart's racing. We don't say anything to each other and after a while Ania falls asleep in my arms.

The voice that made her decide she'd had enough: was it one of us?

Or has she been hearing it for a while now, was it getting louder inside her?

What language did the voice speak in?

Was it English, and she got scared that soon she'll forget Polish?

When she called us, did she have to think twice before she uttered a word? Building sentences from memory instead of following intuition?

When she wrote us, did writing take her longer than it used to?

Or was it the realisation - that she's never set an aim so she was heading nowhere?

She would never be able to say she's been in America long enough.

What was that voice which went against all the earlier voices, the voice which told the Jewish girls that their new *Babcia* was going back to her old granddaughters, and that they'll never see her again? The voice which decided she was not going to move to another State, won't try her chances in another house? What was the voice which buried Alina? Which eventually hid the notebook with all the addresses underneath the summer dresses she neatly packed into her suitcase, the night before she talked to the Jewish family?

Ania has theories. She says *Babcia* doesn't have the money to travel, she didn't find another job, or that she needs her visa renewed. There are always more documents, so much paperwork.

But I like to think that her life got better. I like to imagine that one day on her way to the shop to pick daily groceries, she paused by a house she liked and wondered what it would be like to live inside.

That she decided to leave because she knew she could stay.

At first, they thought she wanted holidays. They didn't like it but they agreed. *Babcia* shook her head, no no no holidays, no coming back, she explained. The wife nodded sadly. The husband said something about the Jewish girls.

Before we were born, *Babcia* left for America where she stayed three years, earned money she sent to our parents, paid for their weddings, their mortgages, their cars. The first time she went, she travelled the East Coast and made her way around the States across from the ones she was working in now. When I ask *Mama* if she has any letters *Babcia* sent them back then, she shakes her head. Those were different times, she says, as if any times were ever the same.

How did she decide it was time to leave the first time?

We arrange to meet Fat Eva in town. It's strange to think that we might have walked past her many times before, a stranger who's so close to us now. It's also strange to see someone from the summer camp in an urban environment, our bodies no longer bathed in the sweet lake water and the fresh forest air.

Ania's wearing a long blue dress which magazines promise would optically lengthen her body. I'm wearing shorts and a t-shirt with a Beatles' album cover. The guy who sold it to me said it was imported from England, and the same day I bring the t-shirt to my nose trying to breathe in the Englishness of the fabric.

Although Ania's complimented my thighs three times already, I keep touching them with my hands detecting small hair. I've got goosebumps even though it's warm.

Eva's late. I ask Ania if we should wait any longer and as she opens her mouth to answer, we spot Eva getting off the bus. She has the same clothes we've seen her wear at the summer camp and for a second I wonder if we'll see her in them during winter as well. Her arms open for a hug before she reaches us.

'Sorry, I'm late,' she says kissing first Ania, then me on the cheek. 'The buses in summer.'

We head towards *Planty* park where Eva offers us ice-cream but after we order, she realises she's forgotten her purse. She keeps apologising but we assure her it's okay. It could have happened to anyone.

'It's okay, really,' Ania repeats after we finish our ice-cream. Eva suggests she goes home and returns with the money, but we tell her not to worry, today's on us.

We get sausages with bread rolls at the diner next to the playground. Disco Polo's booming from the speakers and Ania and I complain about people who listen to it.

'I think it's fun. At the wedding or something. Everyone can fool around to this kind of music,' says Eva then joins the singer for the chorus.

'It makes people stupid,' Ania says.

Fat Eva shrugs and hums the verse to herself.

She tells us everything about her family in the same reasonable tone she uses to explain the differences between women and men. She lives with two younger brothers, *Mama*, Grandfather and an uncle, her *tata*'s brother. Their house has two floor and a kind of wing, she adds. Her *mama*'s working, all day, even Sundays. She owns a vegetable stall outside a block of flats.

'The other woman hates her, she accuses *mama* of stealing the best spot from them.'

Fat Eva's uncle doesn't work and Grandfather's the worst. You can't stop him from drinking.

'Unless you get him some pills, something to calm him down.'

'Like what?' I ask.

She takes two sips of Fanta, straight from the can even though we were given glasses. She says it tastes better that way and we copy her convinced she's right.

'He takes all sorts,' she says.

Her *tata*'s in England.

'He went to work on a building site. Through an agency.'

'When?' Ania leans forwards and steals a chip from my plate.

'Almost two years ago now. It's crazy.' She gazes up. 'Yeah... two years in October.'

'Wow.'

We tell her about *Babcia*. Ania says she's left when we were really young, she can't remember what age, but too young to remember. She says *Babcia* calls us often, she sends us parcels filled with gifts.

'Sweets, shoes, you know, some random stuff.'

She tells Eva that *Babcia*'s in Los Angeles and Fat Eva makes big eyes.

'That's far,' she says. 'You miss her?'

'Yes and no,' Ania says. She turns to me and shrugs.

'We don't really know her, right?'

I shrug but feel sudden coldness towards Ania.

'She left when we were super small,' I say.

'For sure. I don't remember what my grandfather used to be like when I was four or five,' Fat Eva says.

'He was probably drinking a lot though,' she adds.

She's never had a boyfriend, but she kissed a boy on the lips last year at the camp. We want all the details, we want movements slowed down and words echoing in our ears long after she's finished.

'It wasn't really a kiss more like when you put one hand on another like this. But with mouths.'

She puts her hands in a prayer. We do the same. Ania's making sure her alignment's identical to Eva's.

'That's it.'

Her *tata* was working as a janitor of Białystok's biggest hospital when the accident happened. Eva was taking care of her brothers because *Mama* was out. Her *mama* had recently found a job, but it wasn't confirmed how long she could have it for, although she didn't mind. She was someone to agree to every opportunity, to arrive at the shortest notice her employers gave. When Eva quotes her *mama*, she lifts her chin slightly and cuts the air with her hands.

Eva didn't know yet he was passed out drunk. She was told Grandfather had to take a nap because of his age. She was always surprised her grandmother didn't need them, but decided it was one of those differences between women and men. When she heard a thud, she thought it was Grandfather getting up from his bed. He was a loud walker. She listened out for his footsteps but the only sound she could catch was the grainy notes of a song coming from the Grandparents' old radio. She told her brothers to stay in their room while she got up and slowly started towards the kitchen.

'I knew already. I don't know how, but I knew,' Fat Eva says and I can see the little girl tottering down the hallway until she reaches the kitchen where she finds her grandmother lying on the floor, motionless and face down.

'That's horrible,' Ania says and puts her hand on Eva's shoulder. It's happened too long ago for an empathetic hug, and yet an image like this never fossilises into a memory you can pick up then put away when you're done showing it to others, your little relic of grief.

Grandfather started drinking and *Tata* lost his job. That's when the uncle moved in. Eva's *tata* promised he'd find jobs for them both, he looked for a long time, but kept failing.

'He found out about it from a friend who left for Germany. A friend came back to Poland four months later and refurbished the whole kitchen in his house with the money he earned picking strawberries. My *tata* said he wouldn't work for Germans after what they've done to our country, but the friend said there are agencies who find jobs in other countries, too, so *Tata* went to one of them and a week later he left for England.'

For a moment I forget where I am, so absorbed with Eva's story.

'We hadn't even finished his laundry,' she says shaking her head. 'Grandfather wanted us to throw it all away. He wishes *Tata* never comes back.'

'But your *tata*? He spoke English?' Ania asks.

Fat Eva bursts out laughing.

‘He probably doesn’t even know a hamburger is an English word! He works mainly with Polish people, Latvians, some other Eastern Europeans.’

‘In England?’

‘Somewhere outside London.’

‘And what does he do there?’

‘Apparently he works at the building site but knowing him...’ Eva brings her hand to her mouth in a gesture of drinking. ‘But he sends *Mama* money sometimes, although with three kids it’s not much.’

‘And he’s been there two years?’

‘Almost three.’

‘That’s long,’ Ania sums up. Eva shrugs.

I tell her *Babcia* left not knowing how to introduce herself in English but is now teaching these two girls Polish.

‘She’s a teacher?’

Ania and I exchange looks.

‘She’s everything. I think she’s kind of a maid right now, but does housework, takes care of the children, cooks...’

‘Your *Babcia*, she’s really something,’ Eva says.

‘Yes,’ Ania laughs. ‘She’s a kind of person who has to do everything herself.’

I imagine what *Babcia* would say about Eva’s *tata*, and I turn my head embarrassed for agreeing with her.

Her *mama* got pregnant when she was only fifteen. She was in her first year of *Odzieżówka*, a school for girls who trained to be seamstresses. She wanted to make uniforms for nurses, good work her parents approved of, but as soon as she started showing, she had to quit.

Fat Eva's *tata* married her *mama* as soon as he was of legal age, and they moved with Eva's grandparents on her *mama's* side. When Eva was three, her *mama* got pregnant again. *Tata* worked in a factory, both days and nights, to prove himself worthy in his in-laws' eyes.

When Eva was five, the second brother was born. She says there might have been another child. At some point she remembers her *mama* being pregnant then not. We agree that one can always recall events which traumatised her, regardless of age. Fat Eva nods.

Later at night we wonder if our *mamas* were ever pregnant before or after they had us. And would we even want to know if we were brave enough to ask?

‘I get it,’ Fat Eva says on another day we spend together outside. We listen to her with our mouths open. We want her life. In our problems we feel so immature, so obedient. Eva gets caught with things cool kids do, cigarettes and getting drunk. This time we bought hot dogs at the petrol station. Eva forgot her purse again and at this point Ania and I mock her for it. We don’t mind paying for her, although I hope our *mamas* never find out about it. They’ll say she’s taking advantage of us, something people always seem to do.

It’s a little cooler today, as if the weather wants to remind us that school’s starting soon and we still haven’t checked the reading list for the term. My parents are too stressed about work to remember this and we tell Ania’s parents that we’re looking for the books on our days out with Eva.

We can be out for hours, there are so many things to see. We’re learning Białystok anew, even the streets we’ve walked on many times before, and other spaces we previously ignored.

‘At this parking lot skaters compete against each other, pretty good ones,’ Fat Eva says. ‘They play music from the speakers and use car roofs as ramps.’

‘This bench, never sit on it. It’s the waiting room for the local prostitutes’ clients.’

‘Here, theatre actors get drunk with actual drunks.’

And here Eva fell once and a handsome boy helped her get up, so she told him where she lived, but he never came to see her.

‘Thank God, with a grandfather like yours!’ Ania laughs.

‘I smoked my first cigarette here,’ with her chin Eva gestures at the old gate, the entry to someone’s garden. This is where we usually hide from the cold when the bus doesn’t come immediately in winter.

‘This is not how I brought you up,’ Grandfather says when we arrive late at his flat third day in the row.

‘Does this girl have no parents?’ Auntie asks.

‘How do you know she’s not going to mug you?’ *Mama* says.

We grab our heads in disbelief.

‘We’ve known her forever!’

‘You’ve only known her for two weeks.’

‘Four! We met her at the summer camp which is two weeks...’

Our parents shake their heads and make us promise Grandfather it’s the last time we’re late.

We spend the whole summer outside, wandering around Białystok, living on ice-cream and soaking our feet in the big fountain in *Planty* park. Eventually our parents agree that it's better for us to be outside with a new friend than spend holidays in front of TV. Fat Eva tells us which girls boys find desperate and which ones appear friendly in their eyes. We giggle at the boys we pass on the streets and turn our heads after older men whose eyes follow our voices.

For the first time, Białystok is exciting and sometimes I worry that Ania will like it so much she'll decide to stay. I bring up England when we're with Fat Eva. I don't reveal that this is where we want to live, but I do constantly compare 'here' to 'there'. I say, it's the music, the culture, the art. Every Polish novel talks only of the War, every Polish film is a satire of the Communistic Era. And Polish music? Back when our parents were young, one could listen to it, but now it's all family friendly crap. Even our hip hop sounds like something one would play on a school disco with all the teachers around. Ania nods her head.

'Polish people are so closed. So repressed,' she adds. Fat Eva shrugs.

'We're Polish,' she says.

'Yeah, but do you want to live in Poland for the rest of your life?' Ania says and I wait for her to share our plan with Fat Eva, to say that we're moving as soon as we turn eighteen, but when Eva doesn't reply, Ania does nothing to continue the topic. Soon, I too forget about the conversation. The sun is warming my back and I pull my t-shirt a little higher revealing my belly. A boy we pass whistles at me and for the first time I feel that I look good. I lift my head and look at the sky. Ania is right next to me and every so often her hand brushes against mine.

In the woods, from the distance, we watch boys on loud bikes making circles in the sand. We sit on the Lovers' Hill gorging on crisps and sipping cans upon cans of Diet Coke. When boys from my school come to play football, we don't scatter off but stay to cheer them. With Fat Eva, we no longer avert our eyes when they taunt us. Quickly we learn to find words which can make tall and handsome boys seem small and pathetic. Ania doesn't always enjoy it. She says if we're too harsh they'll think we're mean.

'It's just a game, Ania,' Fat Eva says without looking at her, then when Ania doesn't reply, she turns to face her.

'I promise, Ania, you'll be fine,' she says and in a quieter voice adds. 'It's good to show that you're not scared of them.'

We've sink into the grass, suntanning our stomachs, arms and legs. We pulled up our clothes to expose as much skin as we can but it's the sun who decides which one of us gets the most of it. Ania'll burn. Her skin will turn red and itchy and for the next few days she won't leave her flat. Even lying in bed will be painful to her.

Fat Eva will remain completely ignored, the sun like her ex who found someone new. For a long time though she'll be trying to find evidence of their past affair, look, here I've tanned a little, and here too, look.

It's my skin which will devour most of the sun's attention. I'll leave the park like a model, tanned evenly, golden. At school they'll ask me if I went to the tanning salon and one boy'll send me a note which will say 'you look nice today'.

I'll take off my clothes at night and see the parts of my body the sun didn't get to kiss. Next day I'll lie back in the grass with fewer clothes on. I'll work on my back.

We've been lying here pretending not to care, half naked. Some boys whistle at us, so Fat Eva shows them a middle finger, and I sit up to check the boys' reaction. Ania stays laid down, her face rubbed into the grass.

'Leave them, come on,' she murmurs after Fat Eva shouts back something about their penises. I chuckle. I lie down on the grass and lift my hand to cover my eyes.

We pass the earphones to Fat Eva and she puts them in. We're sitting on the tree trunk in the woods. I'm in a jacket which I've been taking off and putting back on for hours. Both Ania and Fat Eva feel warm.

Ania presses play on the CD player and the first track starts. We know this album by heart so while we can't hear a sound, we can still mouth the lyrics as we imagine them arise in Eva's ears. She listens in focus staring into our eyes, the corners of which lift when she smiles at the way the guitar releases the sweetest chord.

Afterwards she tells us she's heard the Beatles many times before, but never like this. We nod and admit we didn't expect it either, but once we dived into specific albums, we knew it was the music which expressed everything.

'It's like drugs,' Ania says.

Before we leave, Eva asks us to repeat the album's name and I pronounce it slowly for her.

'You sound so good when you say it,' Eva says and Ania's face lights up.

'She speaks English perfectly,' she says. I blush and shake my head.

'There are people who speak so much better than me.'

'Maybe English people.'

'I don't know.'

'Is there anyone in your class who speaks it so well?'

'Exactly,' she says when I shake my head, come on, and roll my eyes trying to hide how flattered I feel.

Eva's eyes glimmer. 'You must really like it,' she says.

'Yeah...'

Ania and I burst out laughing.

'She loves it,' Ania says. 'I'm surprised you haven't picked up on it earlier. If she could, she would speak English all the time.'

'Really?'

'I nod.'

'That's really cool. I've never met anyone who'd be into English like that. That's really cool. What do you like about it?'

'Everything,' I say without hesitation. Ania laughs at how true it is.

We get up and start in the direction of the cemetery then continue towards the bus stop where we separate. When Fat Eva gets on the bus, I turn to Ania.

'That was nice what you said about me.'

‘It’s all true.’

‘Still, thanks.’

‘I’m happy you’re passionate about something so much, and because of it we can understand what the Beatles sing.’

‘You’d understand without me.’

‘Not a chance. I’d probably get frustrated if I didn’t get something the first time. You have this crazy determination I don’t understand.’

On the last day of summer we have pizza in town and later we go to the park where a man in the raincoat shows us his penis. We can't stop laughing as we run back to the main road, and we're tortured by hiccups for hours afterwards.

Back in my flat, Ania and I tell each other the same story over and over again. We can't believe this happened to us, we repeat in excitement as if we've won something, an experience we can't wait to tell others about.

We've heard a word 'pervert' a lot and our *mamas* warned us about men who hide behind trees in parks, but we never believed they existed. Ania's recalling what his penis looked like.

'Like a snail,' she decides and we laugh for a long time.

'It's gross,' she says.

'I wonder what it's like to have a penis,' I say.

'Oh my God, I bet it's so much better. You can pee anywhere!'

'Yeah, but then you can't hide it when you're aroused.'

'Fair point.'

Later she tries to draw it but she can't.

The Jewish girls beg her to stay. They make a beautiful poster and present it to *Babcia* like an assignment at school. They tell her about Communism, two Great Wars, the concentration camps. They say, if Poland was a State in America, it would be the State of War, and they smile content at having come up with such witty a comparison.

They show her the pictures of the Grand Canyon, Hollywood and a Las Vegas wedding cut out from a magazine. They talk about freedom and the American values, how everyone's equal here.

They explain to *Babcia* how she won't find a job once she goes back to Poland, and don't understand when she says she doesn't need one there.

When the presentation ends, *Babcia* clasps her hands in admiration. She compliments the poster, then stands up to hug the girls.

They ask her if she'll stay now that she sees how America's better. *Babcia* hugs them tighter and kisses them on their heads. The girls need to bend their necks like swans so *Babcia* can reach the crowns of their hair.

They ask if it's because of the money, the question which shocks *Babcia* speechless. The girls have never before acknowledged that she gets paid, and sometimes she allows herself to forget it's the basis of her bond with them. It must be something they've heard somewhere else, sharing their problem with other children at their school, other children cared for by foreign maids.

Babcia embraces them and offers to make them *golqski* for dinner, their favourite dish.

'Does it mean yes or no?' the older girl asks.

Babcia strokes her face.

'Your *mama* and *tata* are wonderful people. They pay me exactly the right amount, no more no less.'

The younger girl leaves the dining area. She says she's not hungry and goes on a strike refusing to eat anything *Babcia* cooks for the next four days.

They ask her if it's the money and she reassures them it's not. She asks them if she could take a Friday off. She'll travel to an agency outside Los Angeles to buy the plane ticket home.

'I'll drive you,' the husband suggests and *Babcia* remembers the other family she worked for, and how she laughed to herself when the other husband offered the same. It sounded like he was going to give her a ride home, back to her country. Now she doesn't laugh, but still refuses, worried that two hours spent with him in the car will make it hard not to change her mind.

Then there's the incident. She retires to her bedroom only to find the suitcase open and emptied, her summer clothes hung up in the wardrobe. Like she taught them.

Her legs weaken but instead of sitting down, *Babcia* walks out into the hallway and steadily continues to the living room where the whole family's watching a comedy. She pauses before taking the final step, then, bathed in the blue light of the TV screen, she starts speaking. When her eyes land on the younger girl, who averts her gaze in response, *Babcia's* voice trembles, and she stops for a moment to gather her words, now scattered, a thousand potential sentences.

For a moment, the husband's hand hovers over the remote control before he presses the button to turn the TV off. *Babcia* inhales deeply but then quietly starts again.

She calmly explains that her suitcase's been open, her clothes taken out and she thinks it might have been the girls, but she doesn't want to accuse them.

The girls refuse to accept the responsibility, but their parents believe *Babcia* and so the evening ends with girls grounded for a week, no TV, no playing outside, and parents apologising to her.

'They'll miss you so much,' they explain. *Babcia* nods. She watches the girls take their stuff and leave, slamming their bedroom door shut. Then back in her own bed, she prays to God to forgive her for leaving them.

She asks them to return the notebook, but they refuse to understand her, telling her off for her crooked accent and mocking her castrated sentences. They repeat her words to each other and giggle. *Babcia*'s skull's so hot if she were to put a slice of ham on it, it would cook to perfection. She brings her hands to her hips, but they drop to her sides.

'Please,' she begs them, but the girls refuse to understand this as well.

She tries to reconstruct the addresses and birthdays from memory but fails. Whenever she thinks she remembers the name of a street, a house number takes her to a different State and now she's no longer sure which cities she's been to. On the map which hangs on the girls' bedroom wall she finds three towns with exactly the same name, all of them in Milwaukee.

She writes two different versions of Velna's address and the date of her birthday only to realise she's missed it twice. Didn't bake the cake she's promised she would, didn't sing *Sto Lat* to her.

She's scared to accept what she already knows: without the notebook she'll never see Velna again.

She stares at the woman who writes down the flight number with all the other instructions *Babcia* needs. She returns the passport to *Babcia*, and with a heavy hand, stamps more documents for her. When she's asked if there's anything more than can be done for her, it takes *Babcia* a second to find her voice in the bottom of her throat, a very long tunnel of longing and confusion each word now has to travel through.

Ania's nervous. She's more than ever annoyed by my uncertainties and self-doubts, and eventually I start agreeing with her - I never know what I want.

'Even picking a film is impossible with you,' she says when we retire from skipping the channels.

I tell her what I feel like. I tell her how I can't remember what *Babcia* really looks like, it's going to be weird to treat her like she's our *Babcia*.

'Why weird?'

'I don't know. I guess recently we've lived kind of without her, and now suddenly...'

'But you're talking to her on the phone.'

'I guess, but it's different.'

'And she sends all the letters.'

'I don't know what to say...'

'For me it's not weird at all.'

Two days before *Babcia*'s arrival, Ania and I barely talk to each other. Every exchange between us is tense, electric. We're like two dogs baring teeth, ready to jump any second.

'What's your problem?'

'Nothing.'

'Why do you have to be like that?'

Our family buys this pitiful carp and I give my parents the animal cruelty speech, which ends in an argument we all later regret. *Tata*'s silent for the longest time. *Mama* says go, apologise. but I won't let her make me feel guilty for attempting to save the carp's life.

'And you think it would be better if someone else kills it? In some factory?' *Mama* speaks with mock sympathetic voice.

When I announce that from the following day I'm going on a vegetarian diet, *Tata* opens his mouth for the first time in hours.

'Ah, go and knock yourself on your stupid head!' he screams, then turns on the TV and for the rest of the night with a stone-cold face he watches some films. *Mama*'s furious at me, because now *Tata* won't help her with anything, and there's so many things we need to do. The carp needs to be killed, the Christmas tree brought up from the basement, the table set up.

I want to tell her that we can do it ourselves, that there are so many single mothers in the world who are managing just fine, like Eva's *mama* who takes care of three kids, as

well as her father, but I stop myself the last moment. The next morning, I try to help *Mama* but she doesn't tell me what she needs my help with, so I'm pottering around the flat aimlessly. When later we arrive at Grandfather's for dinner, I'm trying to think of the good reason to persuade *Mama* to let me stay, although hanging out with Ania isn't fun either. It's Auntie who saves me. She takes *Mama* to the side and reminds her how miserable their own childhood was, especially during Christmas.

'Let's leave them here. They can go for a walk or help. We don't need to add more problems to our day.'

I stay with Ania and Grandfather. We promise to help him dress the Christmas tree up and prepare the flat for *Babcia*'s arrival, but when our parents leave, we're already too tired to do any of it.

Fat Eva says the best part is the trip to Warsaw. Everything else will be strange. We'll probably be so shocked to see her that we won't be able to recall anything else.

So on our way to the airport, I seek meaningful details. In my head I recite the landscape into stories I can later retrieve to place myself back in the car seat next to Ania, to smell again the sweet sweat of our bodies and the dusty air coming from the fans *Mama* turned up all the way so the engine doesn't freeze. A gigantic caterpillar of Polish and Russian trucks takes a nap on the side of the road.

'Some drivers,' *Tata* says. 'They don't even stop, just continue on.'

He puts his hand on *Mama's* knee, the wheel of our car secure in the other.

Mama nods but isn't listening. *Tata* says something more about bad drivers, but after a while he too goes quiet. There are many words in the air nobody reaches for.

And I try to remember that too, this anticipating silence on our way to Warsaw. *Mama* seems to be sleeping with her eyes open. She reacts too slowly when we point at a deer who skips in the distance of thousand fields we pass. Ania skips a song on her CD player, offers me one of her earphones but I shake my head.

I try to remember everything.

She does the same. Takes deep breaths in the airport's bathroom, and her nostrils fill with a sharp lemony scent. All the cleaning products she's tried in the last ten years.

She washes her hands under cold water, turns on her feet, lets through a woman who pushes an older one in the wheelchair. They smile.

It's what Americans do, she reminds herself, they smile a lot, not like Polish people whose faces are tense from constant worrying about politics and money. She once remembered this difference but now like an American herself she smiles to everyone. She walks out.

She's arrived early and now has almost four hours to spare at the airport larger than the one she's landed on a decade earlier, as if all that time has expanded the space.

The family asked her to pack a lunch for herself, and now she reaches for a cheese sandwich wrapped in cling film. One of the girls made it for her. Up to the very last evening the girls ignored *Babcia* as if their food came from someone else, their bedroom cleaned itself, and the woman who sat with them as they studied for school was merely a shadow of one of the palm trees in their self-taming garden. Every day *Babcia* felt her heart breaking and every day it hurt more until her heart opened up to this sorrow, this longing as if it was blood it needed so it could continue to work.

It was during their last dinner when the girls decided to speak. One whispered something to the other, cast a glance at their parents, then together they pushed their chairs back to stand up. They took a few steps away from the table and the younger girl took out a piece of paper from the long pocket of her skirt. *Babcia* couldn't see the letters, but as they started reading the girls' voices rang with her heart. It was a letter they wrote to her in Polish, the letter *Babcia* 'll show us many times in the years to come until we'll ask her to stop, the fading letters threatening to disappear.

She cried as hard as the girls did when it was time to say goodbye. She wrote down her address in Poland and told them to visit her one day. The wife cried shy tears and even the husband wiped his eyes often. *Babcia* thanked them for everything and the following morning she left.

All the way to the airport she's trying to remember everything.

7

Babcia doesn't sit for days. She unpacks soon after we leave, and the following day she bathes us with gifts. She wants us to have everything she's brought back, doesn't keep a single dress, and if we don't want something, she puts it in a black bin bag to donate to a shelter for homeless people.

'Maybe try selling it, *Mama*,' *Mama* says.

'No, darling, these are not for sale. These are for people in need like I was when I came to America.'

'*Mama*, don't be so dramatic,' says Auntie. 'Now, you could sell them and buy yourself a new dress.'

'I've got everything I need here,' *Babcia* says and it becomes something she tells us every day. She has everything she needs, doesn't need anything more.

Babcia is shedding her American life like a cocoon she's grown too big for, although I realise it much later when I shed my own English skin. It's a performance I'll repeat all the time. In Poland no longer feeling Polish, but abroad also foreign. It's funny how you move in search of your true self, hoping to find an identity which fits. But who is the real you? And who's judging who you're not? And those things that you want to become, do they change as you change or do you change to fit them?

Babcia speaks about America all the time. She narrates random fragments of her other life, disconnected from any space or time. One moment we're in the house in Chicago ironing the duvet covers and sheets, and the next we're cleaning the rugs in a flat in Milwaukee showing our bosses the superiority of homemade mixtures over the fancy cleaning products their last maid spent fortune on. Sometimes there are children around us, often we're alone and the house is old and silent.

Babcia juggles the names of people and places and soon we learn to recite them like childhood rhymes. We ask her what names we would have in America. She smiles at Ania.

'You'd be Annie,' she says then she turns to me and her face twists as if to catch my personality with this moment's net.

'You'd be Catherine,' she gives me an old lady's name. Ania smirks.

'Or Katie, Kate.'

We use our new names on Christmas postcards we send with *Babcia* to distant relatives. She's upset at Grandfather for not sending them with us while she was away. We reassure her that we always called and talked to her sisters, their husbands, and their children's children.

'They're your cousins,' *Babcia* explains. 'You need to keep in touch with them. Family, my children, is a second church.'

She makes us food Grandfather's never made. One day it's pizza with tomatoes and slices of *Żywiecka* ham. The next, it's a cake with tinned peaches. She calls it *paja*. In English they call it a pie.

When Ania tells her she doesn't like raisins, *Babcia* makes two of the same cake, so everyone is happy, she says. Sometimes she makes more, so when we stay over, we can have one for supper and still have a slice leftover for breakfast.

I eat everything. At first, I eat, so *Babcia* feels welcomed, wanted. But a few days after her arrival, I find myself wanting the food she makes, with anxious glance checking how much she's made and if the seconds will be there if I wanted them as well. For a long time, I stop myself from checking the scales, instead touching my belly to determine how much weight I've put, but as time passes, my hands begin to ignore my body and instead, they reach for another slice of cake *Babcia* baked in the morning.

'You are what you eat,' *Babcia* tells us one day, and even though most of the meals she prepares are the same as the ones made by every *babcia* in Poland, there seems to be something foreign in them.

She asks us what we want for Christmas and *Mama* says '*Mamo!*' and throws her arms in the air.

'We just want you here,' Auntie kisses *Babcia* on the forehead, and she squints and frowns. She wants specifics, so Ania tells her we want notebooks so we can draw and write in them, and some nice tea. *Babcia* listens attentively then walks over to the chair where her bag is resting, takes out her purse and gives Ania and me a hundred złotych each.

'*Babciu!*' I cry out as she pushes the money into my hand.

'You'll know best what you like,' she says.

We hug her and kiss her on the cheek.

'*Babciu, Babciu,*' we repeat.

'My children,' she laughs.

And the best thing is her unconsciously inserting English words, and the best thing is when these words build whole phrases and we can't find them in my large dictionary. They're phrases made by people she's lived with and only used by them, and sometimes when speaking *Babcia* puts English words through the grinder of Polish grammar, conjugates them to fit the Polish syntax and it's like giving these words a dual citizenship and letting them have it both ways.

Our parents criticise her, say, *Mamo*, we have a word for that, but the best thing is when they can't come up with an adequate translation and the best thing is them giving up and eventually using the English word *Babcia* introduces to us.

The worst thing is you can't ask *Babcia* for English translation because that's not how she's learned, she doesn't notice when transition happens in her head and why some words come out English. So the worst thing is that her English is random and unprovoked, and the worst thing is that eventually she'll forget most English words.

And the worst thing is that it all happens sooner than I thought.

She tells us a story about the avocado-eating dog. We've never tried avocado ourselves, never even seen it in shops while *Babcia* claims in America they grow on trees.

'You can spread it on bread or eat on your own. But I never ate it. What? Will I eat the same as the dog?'

She tells us about huge crossings and underground tunnels she moved through by day.

'At night it's always better on the surface, but sometimes I didn't have a choice. I prayed as I walked underground, and you see, my children, nothing bad happened to me. You need to pray.'

But mostly we want to hear about the Jewish girls, although when *Babcia* tells us about them, I start to worry that she'll go back to the States. The longer she's here, the better the girls in her stories get. Always kind, always obedient. She spent all her time with them, they helped her clean and cook, always interested in what she was doing. *Babcia* even taught them how to make some Polish dishes.

'And they wouldn't eat anything else!' She's laughing now.

She tells us about shops as big as churches where you can find everything and practically free. She always went there to find clothes for us. You could spend hours going through hangers and every day they delivered new stuff. *Babcia* knew Tuesday was the best for offers, so every Tuesday she woke up earlier so that by two she had everything cleaned up, then hop on the bus and across the whole town.

'It was a good bus. Safe,' she says. She knew the addresses of all the shops, the whole bus schedule for every city she worked in.

'If anyone needed anything, they could just ask me.'

Sometimes the Jewish girls went with her, helped *Babcia* choose clothes for us and she would get something for them, as well. I don't have the courage to ask which of the clothes were picked by the girls.

'Ah, how I missed everything,' *Babcia* says.

'But at least you had adventures,' Ania replies. *Babcia* laughs.

'As many as ten people had!'

Grandfather, we agree with our *tatas*, looks ten years younger since *Babcia's* come back, Auntie say it's because she feeds him better.

'And he's not that lonely,' *Mama* adds.

We laugh at Grandfather's silly joke, one *Babcia* doesn't approve of because he says *dupa*, and there are nicer ways to call an arse. We laugh at *Babcia* who hasn't noticed that she's used the word herself when giving Grandfather a disapproving speech. His eyes glister as he brings her closer to himself, then kisses her on a cheek. We clap and cheer. *Babcia* smiles shyly to herself.

Mama cries out when she sees the amount of food *Babcia's* prepared. When we arrive for Christmas Eve, *Babcia's* still in the kitchen, although now she's letting an elegant dress soak up in scent of boiled *kapusta* and cooked dried mushrooms. Our *mamas* take her by the arms and drag her out of the kitchen like a burglar caught red handed.

'Did you invite all the neighbours?' Auntie laughs. *Babcia* frowns and says she doesn't understand what they mean 'too much food', it's exactly enough, but as she starts bringing the all the dishes out, she realises it's at least more than the table can handle. Uncle moves chairs while *Tata* carries in pots and bowls filled to the edge with potatoes and *zupas*. Then we stand in front of our seats and pray.

Along with *Babcia* come the dead, ancestors and cousins we haven't heard of before as well as the ones we never remember existed. We pray for them over Christmas dinner before we thank God for the meal *Babcia* prepared.

The following day we visit the villages, her sisters and their family graves. We only see them for special occasions, weddings, christenings and communions. *Babcia* listens as they tell her how everyone's been. The six of them chirping like hens in the morning.

We visit the graves of the family members who died while *Babcia* was away. Then we visit the graves of the family members who have been dead for decades, graves as old as our parents, then ones older than *Babcia*.

Babcia recites the rosary and after each Station of *Droga Krzyżowa*, the Cross Road we repeat after her two lines of the prayers *pokój wieczysty racz im dać panie a światłość wiekulista niechaj im świeci*.

Later Ania cries in my arms.

‘I don’t know what’s wrong with me,’ she says.

She has only two photos from the United States, both taken on the same day and both in the same spot. The moment's difference is the appearance of another woman next to her, wearing a white polo shirt, a cap, and white shorts. They're posing in front of a big bush of red flowers by what looks like a suburban road. The street floats like a river into the distance. *Babcia's* beaming from both pictures, she's genuinely happy in them.

She tells us the other woman is Velna and that the photos were taken a week before *Babcia's* left.

All of her stories start small then turn huge and dramatic, the number of times she's nearly died. Our *mamas* talk over each other explaining to *Babcia* where everything is, how the Post Office moved and they opened a bank where the nursery used to be, and the buses, *Babcia* should check the schedule before getting on one because they build new roads so the routes buses take will be different from how it used to be, and in this supermarket everything's overpriced, so it's better to go further, and the church they finally finished the new wing, and

It's like *Babcia* got hired, this time by a Polish family in a country much smaller and much less impressive. But she doesn't mind her daughters' instructions, her constant smile is only interrupted by a sudden pop of laughter like a firework.

Anything can provoke another story.

'What time is it in America right now?' *Mama* asks and *Babcia* starts telling us about the day she's lost her watch and had to ask strangers for help. They didn't understand when she repeated words she hoped related to clocks and hours. She recited numbers, pointed at the sky then at her wrist, knocking on it with fervour which made them walk away. Our *mamas* are crying with laughter, *Mamo*, they thought you were mad, but even in *Babcia's* cheerful response I can detect the anxiety she felt when the evening arrived, and she still couldn't tell what hour it was.

Or mention the bread. She says how this is one thing she missed when she was in America more than anything else, good bread and butter until one day she decided to turn the kitchen into a dairy farm. She whipped the milk for hours until it thickened into a perfect block. It was during her later days when she grew confident in using the kitchens and gardens of people she worked for. She says Americans love Polish cuisine. She says you should be proud of what you have, you always praise foreign not knowing your own well.

I tell her how I fell in love with English and how envious I am of her having spent years in a country where only English is spoken. *Babcia* listens to me, stares at me with the fascination of a mother with her newborn child. Her eyes examine my face carefully, and I continue speaking a little self-conscious, but also bewildered by this endless attention she has for me.

When Ania speaks *Babcia* divides herself and if *Mama* joins us, *Babcia* triples. There's always enough *Babcia* for everyone in our family.

We spend New Years' Eve with *Babcia* and she shows us how to bake marshmallows in a microwave she gets from our parents for Christmas. Even Grandfather gives them a try. Whenever I glance at him, I catch him smiling before his smile twists into a silly expression. I knit my eyebrows in a haha very funny way, while his face relaxes into contentment.

We open champagne and have a glass each, then Ania and I are allowed one more. *Babcia* keeps checking on us worried we'll get drunk which makes us laugh so hard she believes that we are.

I can listen to her all day but she wants to know how I am doing as well, how the school's going, what I've been learning, if I have any friends.

I give her vague answers and at first she doesn't push me to tell her more, but once the school starts after Christmas break she becomes concerned.

'You don't look good, Kasiu, are you not feeling alright?' she says when I visit her late for dinner. Ania is there doing her homework, barely acknowledging me with anything more than a nod of a head. She's been dedicating all term to fixing her marks. She's already decided on the high school she'll pick while I, five months left, still don't know where to go.

I tell her I'm fine, just tired as I sit at the table where *zupa ogórkowa*'s already waiting for me. I eat slowly. It's too hot to eat quicker I say. *Babcia* tilts her head, rests it on her hand. Her face reflects the future she's worried out for me and I have to laugh at how terrible those visions makes her feel.

'*Babciu...*' I stand up and walk over to her. When she hugs me I can feel her bones forcing into mine.

'I'll pray for you, my children,' she says. 'But you also have to pray.'

We go out with Fat Eva and she asks us what it's like.

'It's strange,' Ania says. 'But somewhat normal.'

I nod. Although since *Babcia*'s come back the pace of our lives has changed, it's hard to remember what it was like before. I have dreams in which I'm a little girl and *Babcia* is there feeding me, telling me stories. I can't tell if these are memories awoken by her return, or just dreams craving more time with her.

'I don't know what I'd do if my *tata* came back.'

'Do you think he'll come back soon?'

Eva shakes her head. 'I think he's too scared. What would he do here anyway?'

In the way she says it there's nothing sad, just a statement as if she was talking about someone barely related to her. I peer at her to see if anything in her face changes. Maybe the words reveal their meaning slowly, but she seems to be already thinking of something else.

Later that day after Fat Eva gets on the bus, I ask Ania what she'd think if we started practising English together. We're alone at the bus stop, it's dark and cold. I move closer to her.

'We could speak it, for example now,' I suggest.

Ania knits her eyebrows.

'I don't know, sounds weird.'

'Why?'

She sighs with frustration. 'It's not really my language.'

I try not to think too much about what she said. 'That's what I mean. If we practised...'

'No,' she says and turns her head seeking something to lay her eyes on.

'I'm going home,' she says when the bus arrives and jumps on it before I can stop her. I'm unable to move, shocked by her behaviour so I miss the chance to get on it, too. I watch as the bus leaves with Ania inside, her eyes fixed on the head of a passenger in front of her.

Ania falls in love again, but this time Fat Eva helps her strategise the steps she should take in order to *get him*.

‘You can’t be too desperate,’ she explains. ‘That’s what’s most off-putting, girls who have no life outside adoring the boy they like.’

I think of Klaudia and how recently she’s been giving Krzysiek little attention. She’s only been hanging out with her cool girlfriends, and some boys from our school, and others, their friends, older brothers or cousins. Sometimes they’re hanging out in the school’s playground ignoring the janitor’s threatening them with police. They laugh, yell back something offensive, then light their cigarettes and head towards the woods or to the off-licence store to get some beers and cheap wine. Klaudia never leaves with them, only when the bell rings announcing the end of a break does she start towards the main entrance, then climbs over the fence to find the boys already waiting for her on the other side, fully equipped with alcohol and cigarettes.

The fewer breaks she spends with him, the more Krzysiek wants Klaudia and the less impressed with him she seems, the more desperately he pursues her.

I try to focus on something else, distract my ears from their words, my eyes from Ania’s upset gestures. Her head drops, she throws her arms in the air, nervously rips receipts she finds in the pockets of her winter jacket while Fat Eva explains to her calmly that Ania’s approach is all wrong, nobody cares about her weight and boys don’t notice her eyelids.

The boy she’s in love with moved in next door and they take the same bus to school. He gets off before her.

‘This gives you a chance to get off with him. Or better even, while both of you’re waiting for the bus just suggest a walk to him.’

‘This will never work,’ Ania says collapsing into another floor of sadness. This time for her love is just a heartbreak.

Spots on her face confirm: she'll never go out with a boy she likes.

'What about a girl?' Eva chuckles.

'Don't be stupid,' Ania says.

'I know a girl who went out with a girl once...'

I want her to tell us more but don't want to ask her any questions.

'Who?' I eventually ask when Ania doesn't, my voice weak.

'You don't know her,' Eva says. 'She no longer lives in Białystok, moved out after this whole thing came out.'

'What did?'

Eva stops and looks up at the cloudless sky. There's no wind today and we've taken off our scarfs. Soon spring will come and with it longer days and longer evenings spent together with Eva. I reimagine the woods with us sitting by the fire we've just built, sipping on beer we finally got our hands on.

'When her parents found out... they thought her father would seriously beat her to death. My *mama* had to intervene.'

'Your *mama*?'

Eva nods.

'She went there to calm this girl's parents down. She said something about a stupid gossip, although everyone knew it was real.'

'So did they kick her out or what?'

We continue walking.

'I think she's ran away herself. You know, to a bigger city, not a shithole like Białystok.'

‘I wish we were a little younger, so we could enjoy time with *Babcia* more. You know like children do, when you learn everything for the first time.’

Ania turns to her back. We’re lying in my bed with the duvet kicked to cover only our feet. They haven’t turned off the heating in our block of flats even though it’s already twenty degrees outside.

‘I feel like we’ve missed some part of her others got to experience,’ she says. I watch her lips open and close as she breathes through her mouth. Every week Ania falls in love with a different boy and all she talks about is heartbreaks she’s cursed with. I want to ask her to run away with me. To remind her of England and living together but I worry about saying anything, worry she’s changed her mind and is too scared to tell me. So I’d rather not know.

I keep returning to the day when she jumped on the bus. Maybe she’s shy, I wonder, she’s become so self-conscious since she’s started new school. There are boys that she likes there and girls she wants to impress. She gets frustrated every time she does something wrong, it’s all or nothing to her.

I decide to wait a little longer before I mention England. Don’t panic, I tell myself, we still have time.

‘But maybe we wouldn’t get all this time with Grandfather?’ I say. She turns to the side to face me.

‘Time’s passing so quickly,’ she says. ‘I can’t believe we’ll be in high school soon.’

‘Sit down, *Babciu*,’ I say. ‘Tell us how you’ve been.’

She sits down, but her legs are trembling with restlessness. *Babcia* needs time to cool down, I think and smile to myself.

‘Well, you see how I’ve been. Lots of work in this flat.’

‘It seems like you’re mostly in the kitchen,’ says Ania. I cast her a disapproving look and she shrugs. *Babcia* ignores her.

‘There’s always lots of work, Aniu, and that’s what life is. A person lives to work and dies when they stop working;’

‘Sounds grim,’ I say.

‘Yeah, what about holidays?’

‘Oh, my children! You have it nice now, but it’ll end. Even during holidays there’s a lot of work.’

‘Listen to your *Babcia*.’ Grandfather says as he enters the kitchen. He’s a rare visitor here these days, only when *Babcia*’s out do we find him boiling water for coffee or cutting a heel of a loaf of bread, his favourite snack.

Ania snitches a date from a bowl of nuts *Babcia* fills up every day.

‘And in America they also just work?’

‘Who?’

‘People you worked for. Didn’t they hire women like you so they don’t have to work all the time?’

Babcia nods slowly, her face remembers the places she’s seen.

‘So much work. From morning to night, Aniu, but I never complained.’

‘And you didn’t get any days off?’ I ask.

‘And what would I need days off for? I went there to work, to earn money.’

‘But I thought they’d still pay you if you had a day off.’

‘They were very good people,’ she says.

‘But not good enough to give you a day off,’ Ania lowers her voice. We chuckle.

Babcia ignores us.

‘Some of the houses I worked in, girls, were bigger than my parents’ barn and my parents had everything, pigs, cows, horses. It was a huge barn, the biggest in the whole village.’

‘What about the house with the Jewish girls? Was it big?’

Babcia’s eyes open wider.

‘Very big house,’ she says.

‘But not the biggest?’

Babcia thinks.

‘The biggest was when I worked in San Francisco. A small family, he was a lawyer and she was a doctor, very cold people. Good people, but cold. They had a son. He never went out. I say to him, go out, and he shakes his head. He says no. To everything, no.’

‘Why?’

‘Maybe he was bullied?’ I suggest.

‘There were no other children in the neighbourhood. His parents sent him out to all these extra classes, but he didn’t want to go. I say you must go, and he’s asking me to let him stay home. So sometimes we pretended he was ill and his parents would let him stay. This son was very smart but lonely and I say go out and play with other children, but there were no children around.’

‘In the whole area?’

‘They lived on the hill. Very remotely. No neighbour in sight, only view of the city, very beautiful. But I couldn’t get there. There was no bus and I’m not disabled, I’m not going to ask them to drive me to town every time I need something. So I had to leave.’

‘It’s sad. This whole family, they seem lonely.’

‘Yes, Kasiu. So many lonely people in America, rich and lonely. I say, why you want all this money? But it’s how people live these days, my children, only money and money. But you need people to survive, on your own it’s not a life. It’s misery.’

‘Family is the most important thing, family and God,’ she adds.

Babcia washes the dishes then slides them between the teeth of a plastic dryer installed in the shelf above the sink. She manages to fit all of them in this tiny space. I picture the moment everything collapses onto *Babcia's* head, breaks, but it never happens even though something's always trying to jump out of her hands. *Babcia's* like a street artist who holds her audience at the highest tension simulating accidents. One sits on the edge of the chair ready to throw oneself to help *Babcia* then in a moment tinier than an eye's blink, she succeeds at catching the object which was about to crash. I'm in awe of her performance, but also shaken. Ania shakes her head, one day she won't make it.

Our parents want to be useful, but *Babcia* doesn't need anything from them.

'Why do you keep bringing me these?' She grabs her head when they arrive at Grandparents' flat with bags of meat, fish, and milk.

'You'll cook something nice with it,' *Mama* says and kisses *Babcia* on the forehead. She takes off her shoes and carries the bags into the kitchen. *Babcia* complains more, says she doesn't know what to make, but the next day we're having fish for dinner.

'Isn't it tasty?' she asks us.

'Don't hover over us like that, *Mamo*, sit down,' Auntie says through her full mouth. Laughing like an evil scientist from black and white films, she steals the last potato from the big plate. Grandfather asks *Tata* to help him with the TV, some channels are grainy. *Tata* moves some cables around and a few minutes later, it works perfectly again.

'Oh, Janusz,' Auntie laughs. 'If you didn't fix it, they'd finally get a new TV.'

'And what do I need a new TV for?' Grandfather cries. 'When my sons-in-law are so talented.'

'They come here, eat eat eat, then gone, like thieves!' *Babcia* laughs after our parents leave. They let us stay longer now that we can take a bus and get home ourselves. We watch Brazilian soap operas with Grandparents. It's the best winter of my life.

‘Every place was different, child,’ says *Babcia*. She sips her black coffee, the thick *fusy* come to her lips and she licks off the coffee grains. Grandfather sits on the sofa next to us, listening to her stories. I wonder if he’s heard them before. What is their life like when we aren’t here?

‘In Chicago it was always busy, big city, people everywhere. You couldn’t hear yourself thinking in this constant crowd! There is a Polish area in Chicago, did you know that? A Polish shop, you could get everything in and prepare the real Polish dinner. But it was very far, Kasiu, and to travel that far I had to have time and where would I find time when I was so busy?’

‘Then Florida,’ *Babcia* sighs and grabs her head. ‘Alligators! Spiders! Aniu, you couldn’t go out for a walk without praying that the alligator wouldn’t eat you! A neighbour of ours, a very nice woman had her dog eaten. She went for a walk, turned around for a moment and chop! She turns back and there’s only lead in her hand.’

‘That’s crazy!’

Grandfather laughs, but *Babcia*’s face is all fear as if she was the neighbour herself staring down at the lead in her hand, the only thing left of the dog.

‘Very crazy,’ she nods slowly. ‘It was a scary place, hard to walk, there could be *bagno* anywhere. Stay away from the water, Benia, my host would tell me and I listened, I’m not stupid, I stayed away from the water as much as I could. But you can’t do it all the time, because there’s so much water, so many *bagnas*, eventually you have no choice but to walk past. So I would walk very fast like this, and then thank God for sparing me.’

‘How do people live in places like that?’

Babcia nods and hums.

‘And where else have you been?’

‘Oh, girls, everywhere! The first time I went to America I couldn’t land in America at all! I went to Canada but I had to find another plane there and how can I find the plane? The airport’s so big and I speak no English so I’m looking for information, but I don’t understand anything. Oh, Benia, I’m thinking, what are you going to do now? But I pray. You have to pray, Kasiu and God will always listen, and I pray and pray and this woman approaches me and says in English, come come, and I think where does she want me to go, but she waves her arm at me and she’s a flight attendant so I cross myself and follow her, and she gets me on the plane and says it’ll take me where I need to go. Or she says

something, I don't understand. I say America? And she says, yes yes and I sit and I pray the whole flight, Aniu, because if they find out about me they will send me back to Poland and then I won't ever be able to go to America again, and what will we do then? I sit like this for hours staring out of the window and I think as long as I don't see the ocean it means we're in America. And we land and I go outside and it's Chicago!'

'I don't know how you survived without any language...'

'Oh Kasiu, how hard it was! But I knew I had to learn and I wrote down every word I saw. I went to the shop with a little notebook and wrote down everything and after few weeks I didn't need the notebook to know what I needed to get. I just had a list and I wrote it in English. You know, how I wrote, how do I know how to write in English, so it wasn't really English just my English.'

'But every day, I learned another word and eventually I could build a sentence. What a triumph it was, girls! A whole sentence! To be understood, that is privilege.'

I listen to *Babcia* imagining Ania and me abroad. On the news every week they talk about Polish people finding work in the countries of the European Union. They say that Poland might join it, too and it'll mean no visas required to work, there will be no borders, you'll be able to drive through the whole continent without stopping once to show your passport until you reach England. We learn in our Knowledge of Society class that England isn't in Shengen and on the border you will have to show the passport and they might even ask you a few questions to make sure your intentions are right. They might ask you how much money you have, or what you're planning to do when you get there. Maybe you'll have to tell them your address although if you don't have one, you're still allowed to enter. It's an unimaginable moment in the history of our country, in the history of us.

Babcia tells us everything. For the first time I understand how far she had travelled, in how many different houses she worked.

In one house there was nothing to eat.

'They ate only cake.'

I think I'd like to live solely off cake, but *Babcia*'s almost crying when she tells the story.

In another house someone locked her in and wouldn't let her out unless she had something really important to do.

'But nothing was important enough for him. If there was a fire, he wouldn't let me leave!'

Grandfather shakes his head and wraps his arm around *Babcia*, but her body doesn't relax. She remains tense like a string pulled opposite directions. I wonder how she sleeps at night.

Whenever Grandfather finds us talking to *Babcia* in the kitchen or the living room, he walks over to her and kisses her on the head, then strokes her hair while he says: listen to your *Babcia*, to everything she says, she's a very smart woman. If you're like your *Babcia*, you'll achieve everything you want in life.

Babcia waves her hand at him, embarrassed. Ania and I smile to each other at how sweet they are.

'And you need to listen to your Grandfather too,' *Babcia* evens his praises.
'Remember he took care of us all when I wasn't here.'

We nod happy to see them together at last.

Babcia's worn many skins: that of a girl scared of planes and of a woman who dreamt of flying; that of a girl who married a man she hardly knew and with whom she brought up two daughters and two granddaughters, and yet, even though she's worn so many different skins, she is still afraid of thunders, silence and fog. With each of her stories, her skins pile up in front of us inviting us to examine them closer: their marks and scars, the badly stitched wounds and still bleeding cuts. *Babcia's* skin is hard.

We talk to each other as if nothing's happened. Emilka tells me how her Christmas was, how her *mama* protested against buying a carp, but tradition is tradition, their *babcia* would die if they didn't have the real carp on the table.

When she asks me how mine was, I tell her it was alright, Christmas at Grandparents', then we list the gifts that we received.

'How's Ania?'

'All good.'

'Are you still sleeping together?'

A flash in her eyes, something strange.

'Because you used to sleep over at each other's all the time.'

'Yeah, and we still do, why?'

'No, that's cool.'

We unpack our backpacks and Emilka puts a new pen on the desk.

'Nice,' I say and she smiles to herself. Something's different between us, but I can't tell what it is.

I don't mention *Babcia* and I worry Emilka can tell I'm hiding something important from her. Still, I'm not sure how to approach our friendship. I am cautious when I talk to other girls from our class, but she doesn't seem to mind, she does so herself.

When after Christmas break Emilka and I walk to the bus stop together, I expect her to tell me something about food, how much she weighs, or what diet she discovered, but instead she talks about her sister and the sister's boyfriend. There's never been a young man in their house, so this is weird.

'You know, not a worker.'

She tries to find out if her sister's sleeping with him. She used to preach sex only after marriage, and when the boyfriend stayed with them over Christmas period, they put him on a sofa in the living room.

'So I really don't know.'

My bus arrives at the bus stop we're just a few steps from. I hold back from running.

'Chemistry test tomorrow ... only the second week, and now ...'

Marcin and Maciek, the class nerds, are waiting outside the kiosk. I nod at them, but nothing else.

'Do you like someone from our class?'

'No, you?'

'Sometimes. Piotrek's quite handsome, maybe if he dressed differently ... Apparently Ola kissed him.'

'What? Really?'

'I don't know, that's what everyone's talking about. At some party or something. Krzysiek invited half of the class. I couldn't go, but there were lots of people, people from outside, too...'

'Klaudia was there?'

Emilka raises her eyebrows and looks at me, bemused.

'And you're only Klaudia and Klaudia? I saw the way you're looking at her. You probably want to suck up, huh? '

'No,' I blush. I look away, pretending to look out for the bus.

'Come on, every new girl wants to suck up to her. Everyone was like that at the beginning, but Klaudia is Klaudia. '

'Whatever that means.'

Emilka laughs as if I were joking.

'Exactly, whatever that means.'

I wait for her bus to arrive first, then when she gets on it I wave weakly until I'm sure she can no longer see me through the window. I take a few steps back and realise I'm sweating. Maciek's and Marcin's laughter startles me and without thinking, I start walking in the direction of the town, ignoring the sound of the bus arriving, the bus which turns out to be mine.

I don't feel the relief I expected to feel when the following day Emilka's nice to me again. I barely answer any of her questions, but she ignores it, chirping on about the load of work we have to do this term and sharing celebrity gossip with others.

She becomes popular with girls from our class. They gather around us to listen to her speaking louder now and making terrible jokes everyone laughs at. I watch her grow stronger and my stomach hurts. At the end of the day, I lock myself in the bathroom and bite all of my nails.

She's surprised we've never tried cigarettes.

'But your parents smoke,' she says to Ania.

'I know, I know, I'm a coward,' Ania resigns.

'Have you tried many times?' I feel awkward posing the question, not knowing the language to describe smoking.

Fat Eva nods.

'Yeah, probably had like twenty cigarettes in my life...'

'Twenty? That's like a whole pack!' Ania cries.

Fat Eva chuckles.

'Yeah, exactly that.'

She takes a pack of red Viceroy's from the pocket of her fleece. I look around again but there's no-one in sight. Nobody goes to the woods in that weather. Ania's cheeks are red from cold, excitement or both. The flick of a lighter and Eva lifts a lit cigarette to her mouth. She closes her eyes and takes a long drag as if it was a kiss. My head spins so I keep shifting in one spot. I glance at Ania, she smiles at me nervously. I turn my head to check if anyone's appeared.

'Come on, we're already looking suspicious,' Ania says but then does the same.

I take the cigarette from Fat Eva's hand then, following her instructions, bring it into my mouth and inhale.

Mama always said that in *lumpeks* there are no clothes, but old rags poor people bring in exchange for money to buy vodka with, so don't even go there because you'll get mugged, you'll be undressing in a changing room and someone will stick their hand in and take your clothes. Auntie confirms it, although admits at the same time that some of their clothes came from *lumpeks*.

'But those were different times,' she explains.

There are two *lumpeks* in the city centre, one in the basement of the council office, and the other one next to the train station where taxi drivers smoke Russian cigarettes and eat cheap kebabs, and where homeless drunks spend days and nights asking for money and pissing on the bus stops. That's the *lumpeks* we're standing outside with Fat Eva, who promises we'll be surprised.

'There are clothes from abroad, from Germany and England,' she tells us.

We're looking for something to wear for the school disco and as we wander down the thin space between large boxes of clothes, only ten złotych per kilo, I feel myself blushing. I touch the fabrics of clothes which sing for my attention, shorter shorts, shorter skirts, lower tops and imagine Klaudia wearing them, I imagine her green bra winking from the pink t-shirt Fat Eva's lifting to show us.

'What do you think?'

Ania needs only three minutes to fill the whole basket. She wants to try all of them on.

'Help,' I cry when she reaches over me to grab a pair of trousers.

Afterwards, we ask a taxi driver for a spare cigarette and share it while we wait for the bus. For the first time I'm excited about the school disco, and both Eva and Ania confirm they are, too. Although our schools organise them on different days, it feels like something we'll experience together. We talk on the bus loudly and an older woman gives us a speech about how back in her day girls were quiet and nice, and we show her our tongues and repeat after her like mechanical parrots we got from *Babcia* when we were children and she was still in America.

We're parked outside the school and I'm waiting for the right moment to get out of the car. I don't want *Mama* to see anyone from my class, she probably won't like them, will say Emilka's too skinny, and Krzysiek's too short. And even worse if Klaudia walks by.

I take a deep breath and open the doors when *Mama* pulls me back in. I turn around.

'I was just about to...' I say, but I know she doesn't believe me. She thinks everything else is more important to me than she is. Sometimes I want to tell her how I worry about her every night, I worry she might die, but she wouldn't see it as a proof of love.

'So what, if I'm dead?' she would ask.

I hug her and promise to be back by ten. I press the door handle and the cold air strikes my face. Too cold. I get out. I say bye again, this time through the window. I walk towards the building where the music hits me before I reach the entrance. A song they play at the parties, you can't find it on the radio, so everyone who sings the lyrics is better, cooler than others who don't, but are trying to learn the lyrics as quickly as they can so the next time it's played, they'll be able to join. On my way to the gymnasium, I pass Agnieszka and Monika, who are heading towards bathrooms. With every step forward, it gets darker and louder. I pass the physics teacher, who supervises us tonight, but she'll probably just hang out with the P.E. teacher who seems to live at the school. I can't imagine him in anything else but tracksuit and now I spot him wearing jogging pants and a blue polo shirt.

I walk into gymnasium and it's already stuffy inside, the smell of perfume, cheap and fresh, the ones you can buy in the large supermarket across the street from our school, and the leather of shoes wiping the linoleum floor. A lot of people are leaning against the wall, but many are dancing. I find a space next to a group of girls, whom I don't know but often see on the corridor. My gaze scrambles through the crowd of bodies in the middle of the hall and I recognise Ola and Judyta, who are dancing like they're possessed. Jumping and throwing their arms up, taking space four people could fit in. I watch them, trying to learn their dance-notdance. They shout the lyrics of songs to each other, bouncing forwards and pulling back, and in the way they sing I can see that to them the lyrics mean something more than what the author intended. The song is the witness to their own anecdotes as wild as their dance. I scan the room. There's a big difference in the way boys dance, and it's the nerds who dance the best, throwing their bodies, letting go off control. I smile to myself but also to them. Now I wouldn't be embarrassed to walk over there and dance with them. They submit themselves

completely to the music unlike the popular boys, for whom the music is just a background, a soundtrack, but not their life.

Emilka appears in the entrance and locates me immediately.

‘So many people!’ she shouts. She kisses me on a cheek. ‘Anyone interesting?’

‘Everyone you’d expect.’

We’re searching the room together. Now I wave at Agnieszka and Monika, who beckon at us to join them. As I walk towards them, I pick up the rhythm with my body, shift from foot to foot, flex my back. Emilka’s dancing too cautiously. She seems to copy the movements of everyone who’s dressed well. I lean towards her, say something about how in ten years we’ll be laughing at this moment, but she’s barely aware of me.

Around eight Klaudia shows up. It’s been almost forty minutes since I got here, three times in the bathroom, twice to pee, once to wash my face. I curse myself that I didn’t bring any cosmetics. Everyone seems to be fixing their make up hundreds of times. Even Emilka does something to her hair, brought a little spray from her *mama*. When we leave the bathrooms, we pass Klaudia with three girls attached to her. I say hi and one of the girls raises her eyebrows while Klaudia keeps walking as if I wasn’t there.

We return to our circle, but now I can’t focus on anything but Klaudia. When she shows up, her skirt is tucked a little higher and her bra is visible from her tight-fitting blouse. I try not to think about what I look like when I dance at this point, or what our group looks like in general. I listen to the lyrics of the song, to the rhythm of the music, to the sounds and I try to find something in them that I like, but in reality, I just want to be with Ania now and listen to the Doors. A week ago, there was a disco at Ania’s school and she left after barely two hours.

‘And what? Am I supposed to just sit and be depressed?’ she replied when I asked her why.

Now I want to leave this place myself, and it hasn’t been even an hour.

‘I’m tired,’ Emilka turns and walks towards the exit to the hallway. I follow her out.

‘So...what’s up with Klaudia?’

We stop in front of the vending machine. Emilka throws a coin and chooses a number.

‘I don’t understand.’

‘Well...you keep staring at her, always Klaudia and Klaudia.’

I feel pale and I wish I could go to the bathroom and throw some water on my face.

It’s probably dancing in the heat which makes me feel faint.

‘Are you a *lesba*?’

‘What?!’

I stare down at me feet when some boys rush past us. I look up. Emilka’s smiling at me, and I’m reminded of the first time I saw this smile.

‘No, I’m not a *lesba*,’ I pronounce the word boldly so she knows I’m not afraid of it.

‘Then why are you so excited about Klaudia?’

‘I’m not excited,’ I roll my eyes. ‘We just say hi to each other sometimes...Jesus... like everyone else in our class.’

Emilka tilts her head and looks at me with her eyebrows raised as if she was encouraging me to tell her something. But there’s something more in her expression, something I can’t name. At the same moment Klaudia appears and I unconsciously turn my head after her. Emilka bursts out laughing. I startle when Sprite falls out of the machine.

‘Wanna sip?’ Emilka’s hand reaches out but I shake my head no, even though I don’t want anything more than a drink right now. She takes a sip.

‘Wanna go back?’

‘Sure.’

When we enter the hall the first thing I see is Klaudia and Krzysiek kissing passionately by the wall. He grabs her buttocks and she lets him do it, even moves her hips a little. I search for the teachers, but of course they’re not here. I turn around and a few moments later I’m outside the school’s building, practically running towards the bus stop. I imagine Emilka telling Monika and Agnieszka about me, and the word in my head makes me feel dizzy.

‘Oh,’ *Tata* says when I enter the flat. *Mama* comes out from the kitchen.

‘It wasn’t fun?’

‘So so. The music wasn’t good,’ I take off my shoes.

It’s quiet and calm inside the flat. I return to the living room in pyjamas and lie next to *Tata*, who’s sitting on one side of the sofa. *Mama* joins us a moment later. It’s alright, everything’s alright. *Tata* chuckles at the simplicity of this moment. We haven’t spent time like this for ages, the three of us watching some movie on the TV, something with Arnold or Steven Seagal.

I let myself be kidnapped by the story so foreign to my problems. But what are my problems exactly? Isn’t it better than how it used to be? In the past I’d never even consider going to a disco, in primary school? Forget it. So why does everything feel so much harder right now?

Emilka's standing by the windowsill with Monika and Agnieszka talking about something. I walk over to them and say hi but neither of them replies. I get closer, repeat what I've said and the same moment all three of them turn around and head the opposite direction.

Disbelief pins me to the ground. I don't understand what is happening, then I remember.

Might it be a joke? I remain standing, unsure what to do. I wait for one of them to return, pat me on the back, start laughing. I wait but they're now standing in front of the doors to our classroom, sinking deeper into conversation. Only when I taste blood in my mouth do I realise I've been biting my nails and cuticles, but I can't stop myself from biting harder. The teacher shows up, opens the doors and as Emilka walks past me, I pull her by the sleeve.

'Hey, get off me, *lesba!*' she snarls.

Everything inside me collapses like a ruined building. I try to maintain balance, but I can't feel my legs anymore. Somehow, I manage to get into the room and as I nervously look around, all the faces stare at me in a way I know all too well. I hear it again, a different voice, somewhere behind my back. I stop by the front desk in the middle row and take a seat next to The Girl No-One Speaks to.

During the break I trip over someone's foot and two boys laugh when I almost fall on my face. The next two breaks I spend in the bathroom where I keep biting my nails even though there's nothing left to bite. I'm afraid of everyone from my class, afraid it's spread around the whole school already. All day I feel like I'm going to be sick, throw up right on my desk. When the lessons come to an end, I have to stop myself from running outside. Twice someone shouts after me. The same word.

The next day I sit next to The Girl No-One Speaks to and immediately two girls behind me start talking between each other.

'I heard she was trying to kiss Emilka in the bathrooms.'

'What? When?'

'Not so long ago.'

At break as I rush towards the bathrooms, Emilka turns and whispers something to Agnieszka.

I stop leaving my desk during breaks unless we have to change the room. Focus on homework, prepare for surprise tests, but I'm so behind, I don't understand anything I'm reading. I get my first C in English. At the end of the day I see Klaudia laughing at me with some friends from a different year. Everybody knows.

8

Grandfather's not feeling well, and this is the first time he's talking about it. Usually, he keeps his pain in silence, endures. Now he crunches with every step.

'His spine's twisting,' *Mama* says.

'Grandfather used to always tell us to straighten up and now look how he slouches,' says Ania.

Grandfather tells us he's not feeling well. He says it in a low voice as if he was ashamed. Ania tilts her head and looks him straight in the eyes.

'But what does it mean 'unwell'? Something's hurting you?'

'Probably everything,' I say quietly.

Slowly, Grandfather sits down in his armchair, but doesn't reach for the remote control. He sits, staring at the black screen.

'Okay, Grandfather, we'll be going now,' Ania calls a little louder, although she hasn't moved a step. I wait for him to say something, but he sits still facing the TV screen.

'Let's go. Soon they'll be complaining,' Ania nudges me in the arm.

We open the door, step out onto the staircase and immediately we're hit by the smell of bleach, a desperate attempt to hide the stench of urine. Someone's pissing on the staircase again.

We're walking fast, Ania first, I behind her. The patter of Ania's heels echoes like coins scattered down the stairs.

Although it's still cool outside, all the plants are green, and some have already began to bloom. The first vegetables will grow at the allotment. I try to remember the last time we were there when I spot my parents' car. We get inside, *Mama* doesn't even turn around, I think they've argued about something, the silence between them is so uncertain.

'Hey,' I say.

The car starts towards the main street. I gaze out of the window and picture Grandfather sitting in front of the TV, no remote in his hand.

It is strange at the allotment without Grandfather, but we have to be here, we need to clean up. *Mama* 's watering rows of carrots, potatoes, and beetroots. We forget where the radish grows, we'll have to let it die. Nobody's watered here for ages. Whatever grows is in survival mode. Maybe we shouldn't eat those vegetables at all, they've been through so much already.

Ania's walking along the plot. She's sad and barely says a word. I go up to her and point at the hill where a toi-toi now stands.

'Wow,' she says. We recall how it used to be just a hole. 'I was always afraid I'd fall into it.'

'And there were all those scary spiders.'

'I remember,' she smiles but is still sad.

'What happened?' I ask, although I know very well what happened. It is strange at the allotment without Grandfather. She looks around with her head held high as if this was our last time here.

'I wonder if this tree will grow any more,' she says.

My eyes follow her gaze. In front of us is the small tree that our grandfather showed us once. I smile at it. Endure, little tree, I say in my head.

Grandfather's gone to the doctor's, came back, he's very tired now.

‘Pour yourself some,’ Grandfather says when I visit Grandparents after school. *Babcia*’s just left for the store. She’ll be back soon, but the dinner is ready, warm, it’s waiting on the kitchen table.

I try to find out what the doctor’s said, but Grandfather tells me there’s nothing to say, it was just a routine check-up. I remind him he never goes to the doctor’s, so I don’t know what he means by ‘routine’, but he waves his hand like he’s swatting a fly.

Grandfather doesn't move. He seems annoyed. Not in a mood for questions. I sit on the sofa behind him, at the table that's too tall for comfortable eating. I watch what Grandfather’s watching. All so sad, the whole world in a grip of something too intense for us, entangled in political clashes, everything grinds together. Some news about the European Union, how much money Poland is about to get, how many investments and fundings await us. There will be new roads, better routes of exchange. Working without visas, travelling without passports.

I’m thinking of a trip to Austria I took with my parents when I was a child, and how in a boiling car we waited for thirteen hours at the border with the Czech Republic. *Tata* laughed that we could learn the whole language just from listening to Czech radio, and I was thrilled with the idea that it might be so easy.

I wait.

I wait a long time for him to say something about what is happening on the screen, but Grandfather doesn’t comment. He frowns as if he didn’t like anything.

'Have you already eaten?' I ask. Grandfather doesn't answer. 'Grandfather? Have you eaten?

'I ate, ate.'

I want to believe him, but something tells me otherwise. Something tells me Grandfather’s stayed in this position all day, only getting up to go to the bathroom. I want to help him somehow, but I don't know what's wrong with him.

'Delicious dinner,' I say and he hums at the screen. I hear the key being turned and after a second *Babcia* walks in, slouching from the weight of the carrier bags filled with food, stamping her feet, shaking the outside world off her shoes. I jump up to help her.

'Thank you, thank you, darling.' *Babcia* puts her purse on the kitchen table, takes off her hat and walks into the living room.

She stops next to Grandfather, checks his temperature.

'Have you eaten already, Kasiu?' she asks me with a bright smile and I admit that I have, but I wish I haven’t so I could eat again, for Grandfather’s health.

Grandfather doesn't get up anymore. It happens overnight. On Monday he sits in his armchair, his face stern and focused on the TV screen, and on Tuesday he's still in pyjamas in his bed. He doesn't say anything and we don't want to panic, so we don't ask him what's wrong. Anyway, Grandfather's tired again, so he mostly naps throughout the day.

'But Grandfather always dozed off,' says Ania. 'In the armchair, during the day.'

I want to say something that will calm us down, but I know if I speak, the words will come out melted into emotions. I can't hide them and yet I need them to remain hidden, from her, from myself. I'm afraid to think what will happen in case I make it happen, so when I walk over to the bed where Grandfather's lying, I act as if everything's normal. I try to ignore that he hardly speaks, as if Grandfather has always been mute.

It's absurd, I think, it can't be happening that fast.

For the next few weeks, I talk to Grandfather less and less. Often, he just sleeps and when I ask *Babcia* if he ate, she replies that of course he ate something, but when *Babcia* says ‘something’ in regards to food it means he probably doesn’t eat at all.

We tell Fat Eva about it and she furrows her eyebrows, worried. She doesn't tell us what she thinks even when Ania asks her directly.

We're walking around the old Jewish cemetery. Nobody comes here apart from teenage boys who drink at the ruined tombs. Right now, it's empty. Eva reaches for a cigarette from a pack I take out and lights it with a match. She tries to light a cigarette for Ania with it, but the match burns too fast. She shakes it dead.

'My grandfather is always ill,' she finally says. 'But you know how he lives.'

'Maybe they just have to find the right pills for him,' she adds when neither Ania nor I say anything.

We finish our cigarettes and sit on a tomb still wet from the yesterday's rain. *Mama* would tell us we'll get a *wolf*, a rash on your buttocks you get from sitting on the concrete, but right now I can't be bothered to worry about it. I look up at the sky, clear of any clouds. The wind is blowing gently, it speaks through the rustling of leaves on the trees as unkept and wild as the graves.

Fat Eva takes a kiwi out of her pocket.

'What do you think about the new Wilki song? It's not so bad, right?' she says and Ania nods absent-minded even though she despises the song. For years, we've only been listening to English bands refusing anything that came from Poland. But Polish music is making it big. Our peers are not fluent in English and for the first time, they can sing along when a song is playing. Ania starts humming the new Wilki song and I realise she knows it quite well. I light more cigarettes before we get up. It's disrespectful to smoke at the tombs, we agree.

They take Grandfather to the hospital. Again. *Tata* speaks to someone on the phone, some friend from Medical School. He's laughing and thanking a lot, then as he hangs up, is serious again.

I leave for school and when afterwards I visit Grandfather, I find only *Babcia* in their flat.

'Ah, I don't know what's happening anymore,' she picks a cloth off a small hook next to the sink and wipes the faucet's metallic neck. 'Nobody's telling me anything.'

We watch a programme together.

'Are you interested in that?' she asks and I say sure, of course. I want *Babcia* to be able to forget about everything, just for a moment, but there's a constant fear in her face.

Ania and I talk about *this* all the time although we can never get to any conclusions. We don't want to give it a name on some days while on others we desperately seek a specific answer. The whole time we try to find courage to approach our parents, to ask them to tell us what they must know. But do we really want to find out?

Ania says it's better to know even if it's the worst news, then the following day says she'd rather die ignorant. And what would we do if we found out? At least, I suppose, we wouldn't waste time being naïve and hopeful.

We try to eavesdrop any conversations but nobody's saying anything about Grandfather so at the end we decide that nobody knows. Maybe it was, a routine check-up. Maybe Grandfather needs new medicine.

'Sometimes old people act like this when there's nothing bad. Low pressure in the air in this weather,' Ania suggests and we like this version, and we cling to it, and we repeat it to each other whenever one of us starts questioning everything again.

Everything's unreal and I can't tell what I'm doing all days. I'm at high school now, the first year's behind me and I'm part of a group considered cool in our class. I know their names, I know what music they like and who finds whom hot, and when I'm with them I am somehow different, braver, more confident. I talk to the boys from years above me, mocking their philosophical monologues and bawdy jokes. I'm confident around other girls, too. In my class there's only one girl whose style I like. Everything she does is unconventional. She carries a notebook with her in which she writes gloomy poetry. We call her Bleach, after the first Nirvana album. She wears the same shoes every day and never brushes her hair. The boys from our class like her, because like them, she listens to metal and rock. There's also a group who listens to hip hop and a few

girls who have boyfriends from outside our school. One of them goes out with a university student and confesses to me that they already had sex.

But the moment I get off the bus I forget about that Kasia, I'm someone else, someone distant from me, foreign. I enter the flat and take my shoes off as quietly as I can, I don't want to wake Grandfather up.

If Ania's in the living room, she's reading a book, but with one eye she's watching Grandfather. I sit next to her and kiss her on her cheek. We don't ask each other how our days been, only sometimes Ania mentions a song she's recently discovered. In the evening we tell *Babcia* we're going home and kiss Grandfather goodbye. I can tell he hasn't washed in a while.

We light cigarettes on our way to the bus stop where we pass the little market, which has grown decades long roots, older than *Mamas*.

'Wait,' Ania says and stops by one of the stalls. She walks up the three little steps, pushes the doors open, turns back and smiles. I follow her inside.

We leave the shop with four fat doughnuts, feeling like the girls we used to be once. Ania exposes her teeth bleeding the raspberry jam and I nearly choke from laughter.

'This was so good,' we agree afterwards, although our teeth are hurting from too much sugar.

Our parents see each other almost every day like back when we were children. They don't mind us spending the whole time outside, so we come home late, sometimes just before midnight, but our parents are still in the midst of a lively discussion, something about work, money, or politics.

When we're in my or her room, we turn on the radio and gossip about actors and musicians. Sometimes in the middle of the week, we stay up all night.

Tata explains to us how proteins work, how they mutate, how they fight the host. I imagine a war inside Grandfather's body.

And yet everything seems so reversible still. We believe, madly, unquestionably in Miraculous Recoveries. Ania keeps bringing new examples, something she's heard about, someone's grandfather who had the same type of cancer and survived. These cases are all we talk about now. We listen to *Radio Eska* and imagine how next year our whole family will go to the allotment and finish the house Grandfather was building for *Babcia's* return, and we'll refer to this period as our Darkest Time, when we almost lost all hope, but Grandfather's so strong, he survived the War, he's from a village, he'll be alright. Grandfather's so strong.

The chapel is a hive. People buzzing prayers. I walk down the aisle and locate Ania in the first row, sitting between her parents. Every so often Auntie gets up and walks over to Grandfather as if she was checking if he needs anything. From here I can't see much of him. His body lies in the coffin and as I approach it I can see the white skin of his face, hands crossed over his stomach. He's wearing the only suit he's ever worn, the one for the special occasions. I stop before the coffin, and Auntie stands next to me.

'Sit down,' she says but I take another step to see him better.

I lean down and touch his hand. It's cold like the church's walls. I bend lower and kiss him on the cheek.

Grandfather's stomach seems too big, as if he'd eaten ten cups of flour and yeast and now a ready loaf of bread is raising inside him.

I look at him longer, scared I'd forget what he looks like, then when I sit back in a pew, I'm scared I'll only remember him dead.

The chapel's small and humble. The smell of incense and the dimmed light.

The Jesus who hangs on the cross above the altar isn't there.

'They're getting a new Jesus next week,' I hear someone whisper behind me.

As they approach the coffin, people compliment my grandfather.

'He looks beautiful, very peaceful,' they say.

'I hope they make my Czesio look so beautiful when he dies.'

'He doesn't look purple like they sometimes make them. Just the right colour.'

Everyone's kissing Grandfather either on his forehead or his swollen hand. Some recite prayers over his body, plaiting rosaries between their fingers.

The cold air's whipping my face. I walk alongside *Babcia*, her arm wrapped around mine, I guide her through the muddy road all the way to the back of the cemetery. I draw her attention to pebbles and holes. I tell her when to slow down, when to lift a leg a little higher.

Ania's holding *Babcia* by her other arm. Her white face is covered with big red spots and her eyes are blurred.

I grasp *Babcia*'s forearm. If one of us trips, we'll all fall.

The procession is singing sad prayers. They're not really songs but the loud and slow movements of words directed at God to beg him for forgiveness and mercy. *Babcia*'s sisters' break through the priest's voice. *Babcia* murmurs the words to herself. We don't know these songs, so we don't sing them.

And then there's Grandfather's brother who looks just like him.

Ania points him to me standing on the opposite side to us, shivering from cold. The priest says the last words before they start throwing the soil over Grandfather's coffin. I think how he's locked inside and if he woke up, we wouldn't be able to hear him, and I draw the image in my head more dramatic, then Ania lifts her head. Look.

Grandfather's brother looks just like Grandfather, only his nose is a little sharper, his cheeks a little thinner. His face is serious like he's sorting out a complex mathematical equation and I think of the times our grandfather looked that serious. It was usually when he was angry with one of us, when Ania refused to do her homework or I didn't want to clean up immediately after dinner. But this was rare. Mainly his face was lit up with a smile, like that of a boy who's been running all day, ignorant, bright. Only the last months of his life the smile disappeared entirely and no matter how hard we tried to make him laugh, we failed and that failure made us grow frustrated and sometimes Ania would say something mean to him and I would try to calm her down, but instead find myself saying something meaner and still, his face remained unchanged, serious like that of his brother right now.

We don't have to say anything to each other. We know we will never approach him.

We watch a hole being dug out by two young men, then the coffin lowered into it. *Babcia* throws the first handful of soil. A few other people including our *mamas* do the same. I wish I could move but I'm scared if I do, I'd throw myself into the hole. I'm holding Ania in the strongest embrace to prevent her from doing the same.

Everyone's talking about *Babcia*. They worry she won't last another year. That's what happens to people who've been married for most of their lives. One of them dies and the other dies from a heartbreak. They don't even have to love each other very much, it's the time they'd spent together, decades of sharing everything. They compare Grandfather to a limb. They say, Grandfather was like an arm or a leg, and when you lose an arm or a leg it's very hard to continue living.

Babcia is sitting in his armchair and praying all day. The only part of the body she seems to need are fingers to move the beads of the rosary.

They speak about her like she's a plant who needs to be watered daily.

'She has a jug in the kitchen. Fill it up,' *Mama* instructs us before our parents leave to sort more things out. Our *mamas* have been arguing about the tombstone for days. *Mama* wants it to be big, easy to spot at the cemetery which has been expanding every year. Auntie wants something calmer, she says. People steal from your grave if you draw too much attention to it.

I imagine someone digging out Grandfather's body to perform an experiment to bring him back to life. I share this image with Ania who chuckles coldly.

We are kissed on the cheeks and given some money in case *Babcia* needs anything.

Ania cleans up the kitchen, wipes the table, changes bins.

Babcia seems flustered about our presence. She wants us to go out, not worry about her.

'We're not worried,' Ania explains. She pronounces each word loudly and clearly as if she was repeating the same thing for the third time. 'We just want to spend some time with you.'

Babcia nods but then encourages us again to go out.

'Such a good weather,' she says. She hasn't been out for the last two days.

When we come back the TV is set on a volume so high *Babcia* wouldn't hear the war if it started. I grab a jug and fill it with fresh water, then walk over to the table next to the armchair she sits in. Only then does she notice me.

She places her hand on the left of her chest and I apologise for scaring her.

'Will you eat something?' she asks but when we tell her we're not hungry she doesn't persist. I go to the kitchen where Ania's making herself a cup of tea.

'There's mint and Earl Grey,' she says. I shake my head no.

I'm afraid to sit in silence so I rumble about something meaningless while Ania keeps stirring the tea long after it's cooled down.

Since his death, Grandfather visits *Babcia* every night and she doesn't talk much about these visits but tells us to pray, to pray a lot. The first few days someone dies are the most important for praying, pray so they find their way to God, prayer is their light.

And I do pray. I pray because it makes me feel like I'm doing something and I'm helpless otherwise, can't bring him back, so maybe I can help him get where he needs to be.

Ania says she prays too and she might do when we lie in bed another night, unable to speak, blaming everyone, even ourselves for all the decisions made and not made in the last three months.

They tell us we should be thankful that Grandfather didn't suffer too long, that it all ended so quickly. But this could only comfort us when we saw him. Now we can't see him suffer, so we want him back.

Our *mamas* decide to refurbish the flat, get rid of some furniture, move the others. They say it's too much for *Babcia* to sit on her own and think about Grandfather the whole time.

It's a big day and we argue with them, defending *Babcia* who doesn't say a word. She shakes her head with irritation, tired of being asked to make any decision. She says, *a dajcie mi wy wszyscy spokój* and walks off to the kitchen, the only space our *mamas* don't touch.

We fight for Grandfather's green armchair and in the end, they agree to keep it, but take it to upholsterer, and a few days later it returns covered in purple flowers.

We smoke red Viceroy's, cheap cigarettes we bought at the Russian market. Our lips stick to damp, brown filters. Fat Eva finishes first. She lets the stub of her cigarette drop on the ground, then walks over to Ania and hugs her again. Ania coughs. Eva pats her on the shoulder and turns to hug me.

‘How is *Babcia*?’ she asks.

Ania shrugs.

‘It must be very tough, but your *Babcia*’s strong, she will be okay.’

I look around and let my cigarette drop.

‘It’s a lot,’ I say.

‘It is. It’s only been what...a year? And now this is happening,’ Eva says. ‘And how are you feeling?’

I look at Ania. She shakes her head trying not to cry.

‘It will get easier,’ Eva strokes Ania’s arm.

I distribute more cigarettes, then we walk to cemetery to show Eva the grave.

I return to school for the final term. Sleepwalk through classes, through breaks filled with condolences and cigarettes. My friends tell me it will get better soon, somebody shares how they lost their grandfather when they were only five. He says he doesn't remember much from that time.

I go to some house parties and kiss a boy I don't like but a different girl does and she calls me a slut. I get so drunk I don't remember how I make it home. Parents don't mention it so I praise myself for developing a great survival instinct.

Ania gets invited to some of these parties, but she says she prefers to stay home. I know she's worried about *Babcia*, wants to be there if anything happens. She hates having her phone off and often leaves lessons to check if she's missed any calls.

A month before our final exams a boy from my class asks me out. We're at the bus stop outside his block of flats. I haven't realised that he's been accompanying me everywhere since I returned to school. We've been hanging out in the same group for a year but he and I have never said more than few sentences to one another. I realise I know very little about him. I've given him no attention because a different girl, another friend of ours, expressed a lot of interest. At the house parties they sat next to each other always, smoked cigarettes and discussed politics of Belarus and I was jealous of them and wanted to be like them but was also too tired to try.

When he asks me out, I consider it a joke, but his face shifts into panic when I don't reply. He opens his mouth to say something, but I speak first. I say sure, as if he was asking to borrow a pen.

He takes a step towards me in such an awkward way I move back thinking he's going to lose balance, but instead he reaches out, brings me to him and kisses me on the lips.

Our kiss is long and deep and involves the tongue.

I don't tell anyone we're going out, but our mutual friends find out. My boyfriend lights my cigarettes first and apparently that's how they can tell something's up between us.

I don't tell Ania about it but the boy wants to see me so I feed her lies when she asks what I'm doing in the evenings or weekends. I pretend to study with a friend and pick the furthest bar in Białystok where my boyfriend and I spend hours kissing. He touches me under my skirt and a week before the exams invites me to his place. He lives with his *mama* and *tata* but they're divorced. His *mama*'s worried his *tata* 'll die without her, so she lets him live with them. My boyfriend hates his father, calls him names I wouldn't use even in jokes.

We sit in his room and watch episodes of South Park. His English is good and I'm impressed. He says he's learning Japanese and wants to live abroad. When I ask him what university he's applying to, he mentions Warsaw.

When another episode ends, he stands up and takes me by the hand. I follow him down the hallway to the balcony where we smoke cigarettes watching people downstairs.

'Have you ever spit from a balcony before?' he asks and I laugh.

'That's stupid,' I say.

He says he used to do it as a kid all days and his *mama* would get in trouble. Then he leans down, opens his mouth and spits. His spit lands on the roof of a car someone's getting into.

'Hey!' the person shouts gazing up. We back away laughing.

He grasps my hand and leads me back to his room. I sit on the bed waiting for him to join me. I stare at the screen of his laptop when I realise he's searching for something in his backpack, nervously as if it was something he's lost.

He takes out his wallet and opens it, then slides out a pack of condoms.

My body sinks. For some reason I decide it's too late to say anything even though I don't want to do this, but I don't want to disappoint him.

We undress without looking at each other then hide our shivering bodies under the duvet. In his single bed he's struggling to enter me for a while, his penis getting limp every time I feel it touch me. There must be something wrong with me, something about my body he doesn't like. He asks me to help him and I don't know what he means but I let him take my hand and move it up and down his penis until it hardens again.

Later he makes me spaghetti, his signature dish, while I watch him confused. At some point he stopped trying then we lay in bed, his arm a pillow for my head. He smiled and

asked me if I enjoyed it and I lied, yes. I wanted to ask him what happened, why he gave up on trying but I was also relieved that he did.

But then when he cooks I realise he's convinced that we've done it.

At the bus stop he kisses me again. He asks me if we can meet tomorrow, but the bus saves me from answering.

I don't tell Ania about what happened but I'm anxious that something in my body will betray me. Something will show that I'm no longer the same, that my body is no longer pure.

Would she be able to tell? Would she tell me if it happened to her?

I know she's kissed a boy at a house party and he tried to make a pass at her but Eva entered the room where they were making out, sat on the bed and acted as if there was nothing strange about her staying, which, Ania later told me, she was grateful for.

'I didn't know what to do when he...you know,' she says smoking her cigarette in fast short puffs, then throwing it behind her, let's go.

At first, she laughs at me when she learns that I haven't started studying but as the exam gets closer she begins to worry.

‘Kasia, if you don’t pass, you won’t get anywhere.’

And I try, I try to worry about not passing, try to worry about having to repeat the exams again, try to look at university requirements. Everyone’s applying to Warsaw or Wrocław and so I decide to do the same, but when I read the module list for the English course I realise I’d rather not go to university at all than study it. I imagine myself teaching English to high school kids, staying in Poland, never leaving. I imagine myself marrying the boy and us having sex that leaves me confused.

At a house party the day before the exams, I kiss another boy and my boyfriend gets furious, smashes a glass and is asked to calm down. The girl that likes him takes him out to the balcony where she tells him what kind of slut I am, how everyone knew it would end this way. I sit on the sofa in the living room downing alcohol from other people's glasses until I feel sick, but I keep going even when the party comes to an end. My boyfriend has left long time ago, but before he had he said something to me, I could only see the disgust in his face and hear no words, the music too loud, the music in my ears. Somebody takes me outside and helps me get in a taxi but two minutes later in the car I say I don't want to go home, I make the driver stop, pay him with the money I find clasped in my hand, walk out unsure where I am for a moment, then continue walking forward until I reach my block of flats at two in the morning.

Mama's awake when I come in and she's furious with me, and whispers all the things she wanted to say to me, but hoped she wouldn't have to, hoped I would change, what would Grandfather say if he saw me, is this the life I wanted to live?

I go to the bathroom, throw up, then fall asleep on the cold floor, wake up a moment later, brush my teeth and manage to get to my bed. I pray to God to do whatever the hell he wants with me, then pass out.

The results arrive. I did great in English, top mark in my class, but my History and Polish will get me to no public university. There are some night schools where you pay terrible money for a diploma you can make origami with.

My friends go out for drinks in town, but they don't invite me, so after a couple of cigarettes behind the school, I walk slowly home.

I have to deliver the same sad news four times. My parents are the most disappointed. *Mama* says she's sacrificed everything for me, worked day and night so I could have an easier start in life, and now I've wasted all those years of her work. Her labour. I tell her I'd never asked her to do it, but then *Tata* shifts in the sofa and I retreat. I lower my head and listen to *Mama's* shouting give birth to tears.

Ania tries to console me, but she can't stop herself from telling me that she has said so.

'What are you going to do now?' she asks.

'I'll see,' I say. She lets out a bitter chuckle, but I don't react. I pick a book from a bedside table, one I've started months earlier, open it on a random page and pretend to read. Ania waits a while longer before she herself fishes a book out of her backpack, but two pages later she closes it, stands up and leaves my bedroom. A few moments later I hear the doors close. I stare at the letters for a long time, but Ania doesn't come back.

Babcia tells me she never managed to do her *Matura* exams, because of the War and that I'll be okay. I thank her for the words of support, but ask if we could just drop the topic, I'm tired of talking about this over and over and over...

Babcia shakes her head and I can see that she's worried.

'Don't bite your nails, Kasiu. Such a pretty girl...'

I drop my hand. Energy rushes through my body so strong if I get up I'd spring into the air.

'I can't do anything here!' I shout and cover my face with my hands. I bite my lips to stop myself from crying. *Babcia*'s hand touches my shoulder, but I shake it off.

'Kasiu...' she says and my name remains in the air for a while longer like a hand reached out.

'Leave me alone,' I manage to say. 'I want to be alone.'

I get up and with my head lowered so she can't see my face, I walk off to *Mamas*' old bedroom.

It's a relic of another childhood spent and forgotten. Nobody's hoovered here for a while and when the sun lurks in through the window the air glimmers with particles of dust, dancing. I sit on the sofa which now seems much smaller than I remember, too narrow for the two of us sleeping together and yet, we often slept like this instead of pulling the bed out. When Ania was a child, she begged Grandfather to let us paint the walls and he never agreed, but in the corner by the bookshelf I spot a little rose she must have drawn in secret.

It used to be the two of us here.

I didn't tell her I applied, so when the letter comes in a brown envelope a week after I buried all my family's hope, I don't understand what it actually says.

I didn't tell her I applied because at that point we weren't talking to each other.

I didn't tell her I applied because I worried that she'd think I wanted to leave without her, that I disregarded our future plans, did things without thinking of how it would affect her.

I didn't tell her I applied because I worried she'd want to change plans. She's recently been doing pictures for her friends, and somebody asked her for an illustration, a picture of a skull which took Ania less than an hour, and she got paid for it, actual money, she said, cash and everything.

I didn't tell her I applied because the thought itself made me feel guilty I decided not to tell anyone and even though I knew she was different, it's Ania, and yet the instinct to save myself made me hide, to escape the guilt, and I didn't tell her that I applied because what if I didn't get in, my failure would open our eyes and I needed us to believe that we could make it, I wanted to believe that if anyone could it would be us, and I didn't tell her I applied because I was scared I'd get in and now as I'm holding the letter reading over and over the opening line, I can see for the first time my life without her and I didn't tell her I applied because even though our lives have been separate for a while now I still didn't want to believe that they were, I still wanted our separate lives to be a small transitional period, a moment before jumping together into the deepest waters, and I didn't want to believe I could exist without her and I didn't want to believe if one of us dies the other will continue living or worse.

If one of us lives the other one lives too.

But when she asks me why I didn't tell her that I applied, I get upset with her for not congratulating me.

So, she says, congratulations.

When I tell my family I got into a university in London, I have to say it in a single sentence because I'm so scared of their reactions. My *mama's* face drops and *Tata* thinks I'm joking then when I show them the letter, he jumps to his feet and hugs me, he says, now I see it was the plan all along, then he beckons *Mama* to join us and in the embrace she starts to cry, and like Ania asks me why I didn't tell them but I say to her softly that I was afraid I wouldn't get it, it was going to be a surprise.

Babcia's worried. She worries I'll travel too far and what if something happens to me in this strange country where they drive on the wrong side of the road?

'And what do they eat there?' she asks and I burst out laughing, but it doesn't calm her down. She furrows her eyebrows and says *idontknowidontknow*, like she's praying over someone's grave. I remind her she went abroad and was fine. And you didn't know any language while I

But I worry my English isn't the right kind, like I learned it all wrong. Now even when I try to practise, talk only to myself behind the closed doors of my bedroom, my throat goes dry and my voice starts to tremble. I forget the most basic words and I'm never sure of grammar anymore.

Parents buy me a laptop and a beautiful pen which costs more than the laptop. *Mama* sobs and laughs at the same time. I smile, holding the tears back.

Once it's on, it doesn't stop as if the letter bent the time into an unforgiving shape. The other students from my high school exchange useful information between each other, talking about point systems and references they need to provide depending on which university they got into. I sit in front of computer until raw morning trying to comprehend the system I've entered. What am I supposed to do next? What documents do I need to deliver?

Parents tell everyone their daughter is going abroad. Every day we eat out and every day *Mama* starts crying in some public place, a cry which turns into laughter. She keeps repeating she's proud of me but now we're crying together, and *Tata* mocks us jokingly, but he, too has tears in his eyes.

I don't see Ania for the first three days after I tell her, then on the fourth day she replies to my text. She agrees to meet in the woods but when I arrive, Fat Eva's there with her. Immediately, she takes on the role of a mediator. It quickly becomes obvious that Ania told Eva more than she's willing to tell me, so her feelings come out of Fat Eva's mouth. Ania walks next to us smoking cigarettes, her eyes fixed ahead. She walks like on the day of the funeral, the same cold acceptance, the same absence of tears.

Eva tells me that Ania's upset that I haven't told her. Why?

'Congratulations, by the way,' she inserts with a smile and I nod and murmur thank you. The other day I walked past a friend of mine, and she hissed congratulations in such a way I got shivers on a hot, summer day. But in Eva's voice there's genuine support. I look at her face and smile thankfully.

She tells me it makes Ania feel like I don't care, like I would just leave without telling her at all.

'But I did tell her, I was just scared of her reaction,' I say to Ania who keeps ignoring me.

'I understand but it's true that you didn't even tell her you applied, so when you told her you got in...'

'I would help you with it!' Ania turns to me. In her eyes there's all the anger she's nurtured since she's found out, or its history is longer even. I disappointed her so many times.

'I'm happy for you,' she continues. Fat Eva wraps her arm around Ania, who now bows her head and slows down.

'I don't understand why you didn't tell me! Why you don't tell me anything these days!'

Eva's nods, shooshes Ania like mother does to a baby, hugs her. I watch Ania weep into Eva's arms.

'I'm sorry,' I say but I know it's not enough. I know she'll never trust me, and why should she?

Eva steps away from Ania, who wipes her tears and stares at me.

'I thought we'd leave together,' she says. 'I thought it was our mutual dream.'

I say nothing even though I want to say so much but the words fail me. They're only words, empty, stiff, meaningless.

'I want to go now,' Ania turns to Fat Eva.

‘Ania, wait,’ I catch her by the hand. For a moment she lets me hold it, then when I don’t say anything, she pulls it back. Fat Eva gives me a sad look.

‘Let’s go,’ Ania says. They turn around and I watch them walk away until they disappear behind the border of trees.

I get invited to another house party where my ex-boyfriend and his new girlfriend thank me for cheating on him, because without me they wouldn't be together.

'I think it's because I was too available to him,' the girl reveals.

He's decided to stay in Białystok for her. The university here isn't bad either and he can always do his masters somewhere else.

I drink slower than others so at some point I'm the only one sober left and the party seems boring until a girl from another class chooses me and two other people to follow her into her bedroom where she shows us a small head of dried herb.

'It's grass,' she explains, and we share a glass pipe packed tightly with herb, hard to pull on, and I'm not sure if I feel anything when I inhale, but I'm excited to be picked for this prestigious group. Nobody else is allowed to find out and we leave the room separately and at different times. Later the girl and I dance for hours and afterwards while we share a cigarette on the balcony, she tells me she's seen me at school a lot and thought I was cool. I laugh. I want to tell her that she must be joking, it's me, the Girl No-One Speaks to, the skunk, the slut. But my head feels light and all I can do is laugh harder and she starts laughing with me, then moves closer, her cheek brushes mine, she says, do you know how university students smoke cigarettes? I shake my head and she takes a drag of her cigarette, opens her mouth and presses her lips to mine. My mouth fills with smoke and saliva. Someone pokes his head in, whistles, then leaves. We kiss for a long time.

At some point I find myself in the bathroom messaging Ania. I tell her I'm sorry and beg her to meet me, to talk to me, only the two of us. I say I love you and then delete it afraid she wouldn't tell me she loves me back.

Then the girl enters the bathroom and we kiss for a long time, and her hand slides under my t shirt, and I grab her arm but when her fingers start circling my nipples, I can't catch my breath.

The next morning I check my phone and only then remember the messages I sent.

She replied.

She says fuck you, Kasia, you destroyed what we had

Please, I know, I'm sorry, what can I do, I'll do everything, I'll never do this again

But she doesn't reply even when I write I love you I love you I love you

‘But do you have to go?’ *Mama* asks a week before my flight. She’s stroking my hair and looks into my eyes, smiling. It’s a playful question, but everything’s at stake in this game.

I can’t answer her anymore. Few weeks ago I’d reassure her that England is where I want to be right now, but I no longer feel like it was a choice I’ve made.

‘*Mamo...*’ I say.

I make a new rule.

If Ania asks me to stay, I’ll stay.

If Ania tells me she doesn’t even want to talk to me, I’ll leave and never see her again.

Babcia begs me to talk to Ania as if she couldn't hear me when I tell her that I've tried, many times, but I can't make Ania talk if she doesn't want to.

'But you're sisters,' she insists.

'Cousins, *Babciu*.'

'Oh, no, Kasiu. Your *mamas* are sisters and you're like sisters, too. It's the same thing.'

She sits us down. Ania crosses her arms over her chest and stares at the black screen of the TV while *Babcia* begs her to talk to me.

'But what am I supposed to say, *Babciu*?'

'What do you mean, Aniu? You can't be like this.'

Ania shrugs.

'Kasiu...' *Babcia* turns to me. Before Ania arrived, *Babcia* told me how as an older sister I had to let go, let be.

'Cousins,' I corrected her then. The word protects me from calling it something else, something she can never be to me.

'In my house you won't be acting like this,' *Babcia* says and we're both shocked by her trembling voice.

'Then I won't come back here!' Ania shouts putting her shoes on. *Babcia*'s shouting over her, and I'm standing behind her stroking *Babcia*'s back. *Babciu*, leave her, let her be. Only when *Babcia* starts crying does Ania stand up. The two of us hug *Babcia* and as I hug *Babcia* and imagine hugging Ania instead.

I write a letter to her I will give her the day before I leave. If she reads it we can talk before I go, she can come over and we can just stay awake all through the night like we used to.

In the letter I tell her my plan. I tell her how I'll go and learn everything, I'll find a place for us so when she joins me, we'll be able to think only about us, not worry about work and places to live. I'll find a job in a pub and when she arrives, she'll work with me, or better even while we work, she can study art, now knowing how to get in I can help her with the application process, I can literally do it for her.

I tell her I'm sorry. I tell her I'll never forgive myself for being such a coward and then I tell her how I've always wanted to be with her and at the summer camp when she fell in love with that boy, I hated him so much and how happy I was when he broke her heart but also how angry and how I wanted to be him and all the other boys she liked. I tell her I wanted to be the boy she'd love forever but I'm not a boy and if I was, I'd still be her cousin, the word I hate the most of all, the word we'll never use when we live together in London.

I tell her I love you so much I can never live without you you are the most important person in my whole life I love you so much please please forgive me please

I'll give her the letter when we're at *Babcia's*, our last dinner before I depart, a celebration of my achievements. Even Uncle laughs hiding his tears a little. Auntie hugs me, you're already an adult, how did it happen, then she hugs *Mama* who's crying again and while our parents talk to *Babcia*, I'll give her the letter. I'll catch her in the hallway as she goes to the bathroom. She'll look at it what is this and I'll look back hoping in my eyes she'll see its content. I'll leave her with it and wait in *Mamas'* old bedroom, wait until I hear the toilet flush and the water running and the doors open and Ania'll stand in them

I'll miss you

She'll say

