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The Sanctuary in Polish Hill

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The Sanctuary in Polish Hill



Honors Thesis

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Department: English

Advisor: Meredith Doench, Ph.D.

May 2021

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Abstract

The Sanctuary in Polish Hill, a short story cycle set in the late 1900s to 2008, surrounds a women's shelter in Polish Hill, Pittsburgh, PA. Ruta Laksa, a second-generation Polish immigrant, moves to the neighborhood named for the influx of Polish immigrants in the late 1800s. Through vignettes of her life, Ruta finds solace in food and community as she struggles with her mental illness. Scattered throughout her own story are vignettes of other women struggling with their own mental illness and those who seek solace and safety. These women build community with each other through food, conversation, and relationship, allowing these characters to be understood and seen as human without the strain of mental illness stigma. The Sanctuary welcomes all and the characters' humanity shines through their mental illness while the Sanctuary offers each character a respite and the chance to heal.

Disclaimer

Recipes within *The Sanctuary in Polish Hill* can be found on the *Polish Housewife* website and the *Barefoot in the Kitchen* website.

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The Sanctuary in Polish Hill

By: Annabelle Harsch

Pierogi *ask babunia for secret

6 small pot, boiled, peeled, riced	} for filling
2 Tbsp. butter	
$\frac{3}{4}$ c diced onion	
$\frac{1}{4}$ c twarog	
4 + p to taste	} for dough
3 c flour	
$\frac{1}{2}$ tsp salt	
1 egg	
1 c boiling water	

For filling:

Riced pot. in lg. bowl.

Sauté onions in butter until lt. brown.

Toss pot, onions, cheese.

For dough:

Place flour on clean work surface.

Add salt.

Make well in flour, add egg and work into flour. Slowly add water, mixing as you go.

Knead dough until smooth.

To assemble:

Roll dough to $\frac{1}{16}$ in.

Cut into round circles.

Add filling to center of circle.

Fold around filling, sealing edges.

Boil salted water and cook pierogi for 5 min.

Serve.

PIEROGI

Tuesdays meant pierogi and kapusta for dinner.

Fifteen minutes until dinnertime, all-purpose flour and chunks of left-over dough from the hand-mixed, hand-rolled pierogi covered the white, acrylic kitchen countertops. Kielbasa purchased from Smallman Street Deli fried in a cast iron skillet, buried deep in sauerkraut and marinara. The plastic wrappings from the deli curled on the counter. Pierogi boiled on the stove. Water sputtered out of the pot to land on the otherwise perfectly clean stove top. Potato skins covered the basin of the sink.

A ten-seater oak dining table filled the empty space in the kitchen, squashed in between two walls. At the table, seven place settings, a vase of yellow tulips from the backyard picked from the earth with little-boy hands. An empty salad bowl. A sippy cup. A highchair.

The refrigerator door opened and from behind the white, art-work decorated door, Ruta Laksa dug through the Tupperware and plastic Heinz bottles. She hummed, grabbed salad dressing, and set it on the dining table. Turning back to the stove, she plucked a marinara-stained wooden spoon from the counter and stirred the kapusta. Ruta's mother bragged about the secret ingredients in the kapusta and pierogi, and now Ruta gets endless grief from her girls for not telling them about those ingredients. This was her great-great-grandmother's recipe, passed down for generations—straight from Poland.

A door slammed upstairs. Tiny feet thundered across the hall—Wyatt. A little-boy scream of surprise. A laugh.

Ruta smiled to herself and gently dumped the cooked pierogi into a strainer in the sink. Sometimes she wondered about how different her life would be if she took a regular job downtown, how different the rooms of this building would be if she worked in business or medicine. Without Ruta where would her girls go?

She loved them, as she should. All she did, she did for her girls. They were an anchor to her, and she to them. A brace. A cool breeze on a sweltering day. She gave her girls all they'd want. All *she'd* ever wanted and *had*: safety and love. So, for as long as they needed, Ruta would be their mother and make them stronger when they returned to their crumbling families and dilapidated walls.

And food was her medicine.

Ruta snuck a slice of kielbasa from the kapusta in the skillet, careful not to burn her mouth or drop sauce on the floor. She glanced at the clock above the table. The old, pale yellow paint peeled away from the wall, leaving the clock suspended between security and collapse. Ruta had this woman's shelter in Polish Hill for almost 20 years, each day filled with laughter, anger, fear, but each day filled, nonetheless, to house those women against stretching paychecks, broken vows, and tears. Her girls had come and gone, leaving promises to visit, to change, to live.

Laughter from upstairs drifted down to the kitchen, one laugh louder than the rest—Denise had come home for dinner. A different daughter visited every Tuesday for those pierogi.

With one last sprinkle of salt in the kapusta, Ruta turned to the fridge and took out a pre-packaged bag of salad, dumped it in the bowl on the table, and untied her apron. "Dinner!"

And Ruta watched her girls enter the kitchen.

HEATHER AND WYATT

The screen door slammed, shouts echoing behind her. Heather braced a hand on the railing, waiting for her heart and breath to steady. The past half hour swirled around her, screams still hitting her at the backs of her knees. Quiet sniffles broke through the pounding in her ears.

Wyatt.

Wyatt slumped against the vinyl panels of the house with his knees to his chest, head bent, his blond curls covering his face. Her own heartbeat. Her second love.

Tugging her sleeves around the fading bruises on her wrists, she walked over to Wyatt, her socked feet snagging on the splintering wood of the porch. She wrapped her arms around her son.

“Oh, love.”

His small, red-rimmed eyes found hers and he buried his head in her chest as sobs shook his little body, bringing tears to her eyes again. No child ever deserved words like that—especially from his father, who had covered him in hugs and kisses only a year ago. For a six-year-old, there was always this firm, naïve belief that a child’s parents were strong protectors. A link of iron connected parent to child. Parents were suppliers of magic and adventure, of peace and friendship.

It was a day thrown in disbelief when the magic disappeared.

Heather stroked his head of blond curls the same shade as hers. Too long, she’d have to cut it soon. He lifted his head but avoided her eyes.

“Is Daddy not our friend anymore?” Wyatt played with the button on her shirt. A small tear drifted down his face.

Heather brushed the tear away and looked out at the skyline of Pittsburgh and the darkening sky, already filled with purples and reds. “Friend?” Was he? Truth or lie? A moment of reassurance or a lifetime of devastation? She settled for the middle. “I think so.”

Wyatt nodded. *I think so* held the potential for hope again. It was almost definite. A mother’s mind, to her son, was built on certainty. She could never be wrong—to him.

A door slammed from inside their house. Heather and Wyatt jumped.

For what seemed like the fifth time in the last half hour, Heather’s stomach began to churn and a wave of cold ran through her body. She held tight to Wyatt. His small fists gripped her shirt. Seconds passed in an awful, tense silence, doors slamming, heavy footsteps echoing through their small two-story.

The past year hadn’t been good to them. Or the country, really. The economy plummeted and millions of people lost their jobs. The Great Recession of 2008, that’s what they’re calling it. Roger has been home more than he normally would, and stress was inevitable. But this? Mother and son terrified to go back inside, jumping at every sound, scrambling for a distraction. Being

lost in your own house should be reserved for families with 100 rooms, not a family with two tiny bedrooms and cracks in the walls.

“I don’t want to go back inside.”

“I know.” Heather looked him in the eye. “We’ll stay out here as long as you want.”

Wyatt nodded again. “Can we stay out all night?”

Heather bit her lip and considered the small, fading bruises on her arms, Wyatt’s red face. Roger’s anger at them raising the alarm if they leave. “I don’t think so, love. Daddy will want us back inside.”

Wyatt’s quiet *okay* cracked her heart clean open.

She would’ve left months ago, if only until the recession blew over, but it would have been betrayal for Wyatt. To him, parents were supposed to be together—he would be so confused.

The screen door squealed open and Wyatt pressed closer to Heather. Her stomach roiled, but she didn’t look up into Roger’s face.

“I’m going out.”

“Where?”

“Out.” Roger breezed past them and toward the paint-stripped stairs leading to the road, jamming a baseball cap on his balding, brunet head. Heather watched him get in his car, something blooming in her chest. Maybe it was the way Wyatt avoided his father’s eyes. Maybe it was the small window of escape. As the Subaru’s engine faded, Roger leaving their house, their neighborhood, Heather turned to Wyatt and unwrapped his hands from her button down.

“You said you wanted to stay out all night?”

Wyatt peered in her eyes, tears gone, eyes bloodshot.

“Let’s go then.”

Her sweet, beautiful boy looked up at her with wide eyes. “Where?”

“I don’t know, sweetheart. But just for one night. So we can get some sleep.”

Heather and Wyatt held each other’s hands. Staring out at their road in Lawrenceville, Heather stood with an overnight bag slung over her shoulder, Wyatt with his stuffed yellow duck cradled under his arm. A million thoughts and options swirled in Heather’s mind.

Hotel? Inn? A friend’s house?

Would they really stay away for one night? Would Roger wonder?

And what would happen after? When all three of them were home again?

It gave Heather half a mind to turn on her heel and walk back inside, but, while they were packing, Wyatt could barely contain his excitement about a night away.

“Mommy?”

Heather blinked. “Sorry, sweetheart. Just thinking.” She consulted the list of addresses she typed in her phone. “There are places to the right and left of us.” She adjusted the strap of the overnight bag. “Right or left?”

Wyatt pursed his lips and held his duck closer. “Right.”

Mother and son set off down 40th, streetlights flickering on to lead them further down. Stepping over trash, they passed Wyatt’s favorite park. Heather smiled. From a quiet, forgotten corner of her heart she remembered the three of them from before. Roger, Heather, Wyatt. At that same park, Lake Erie, walking the Strip. Maybe once the economy bounced back and Roger got a job again things would go back to normal. Maybe it was just a matter of stress and they could be a family again.

Heather’s smile grew and she gripped Wyatt’s hand tighter. “Do you remember when you, me, and Daddy went to the park three times in one day and we got ice cream after the third time?”

Wyatt grinned. “Yeah! That was fun.”

Heather tilted her head to the side. Wyatt’s chocolate-covered face and hands drifted in her mind. Such a flip it was, that day compared to this one. “It *was* fun.”

“Can we get ice cream today?”

“I think it’s gonna be too late. We can grab some tomorrow.”

Wyatt stopped and grabbed her legs, squeezing tightly, and whispered, “Thank you Mommy.”

Tears welled in her eyes, her heart squeezing out all the love she had for her boy.

Every pair of headlights made their pace quicken and their eyes stare straight out in front of them. Roger didn’t say where he was going, but any road could bring him down their path and ruin their night.

Even so, on they walked, mother and son, toward the place they meant to stay for the night. Whichever hotel or inn they found first. Whichever one had room. Heather checked her phone again, hoping she was heading in the right direction.

The right direction. Nothing was right about this. She gazed down at her son to see him deftly hop over a crack in the sidewalk, stuffed duck swinging. Wyatt was just a six-year-old boy, with his mom, having a fun night out. If Heather put it like that, adopting her son’s innocence, perhaps this was okay. Perhaps they were going to be alright.

At the end of 40th, they turned right onto Liberty. Heather could barely make out the skyline of downtown Pittsburgh against the darkening sky. Tomorrow they'd get ice cream. And maybe Roger would have wondered where they were the whole night, and maybe he would wonder where *he* was after all those months. Heather didn't know if it was healthy or not to think more of the good than the bad. But it made her feel better. Roger balanced between Saturday morning cartoon marathons and words of absolute disgust for his six-year-old son who had never done anything horrible in his life.

"Mommy?" Wyatt shook her arm. "Mommy."

Heather blinked and focused on her boy. "Hm?"

He pointed forward. "Daddy."

She whipped her head around. There was the Subaru, at a stop light, with Roger and his baseball cap inside. Heather's feet turned to jelly, but she pressed on with her head down. Wyatt pressed closer to Heather, as if he could melt into her side and become invisible.

Maybe he won't see us.

Multiple pairs of eyes narrowed in on the back of her head, as if everyone sitting at that intersection saw her and knew her and wondered what the hell she was doing. Heart pounding, Heather kept walking with black dots swirling in her vision. Wyatt gripped her sweaty hand and soon Subaru and Roger were out of sight. Wyatt breathed a small sigh of relief, but Heather wouldn't relax that easily.

"Keep walking, Wyatt. Don't slow down."

"Are we almost there?"

"Let's see what's closest."

As Heather turned her phone back on, a phantom hand tapped her on the shoulder, telling her to keep her head up. Keep looking. Keep seeing. Keep watching. She brushed it off; the sooner they found a place to stay, the better. It took some time for the map to load but once it did, she scrolled through all the available options. Wyatt fidgeted beside her, hopping from one foot to the other.

"Heather?"

Her phone almost shot out of her hands. She knew that voice. Heather looked up to see Roger in his baseball cap leaning out of the Subaru, driving slowly beside her.

"Roger."

"What are you doing?" He kept his eyes trained on her, directing the car straight ahead.

"I forgot about a sleepover Wyatt has with a friend tonight. I'm taking him over." Heather forced calm in her words. Even a small break in her voice would be a red flag to her supposed compliance.

“Why don’t you get in the car and I can take you?” Heather caught the fake sincerity in his unsmiling face. He turned to the inside of the car to reach for his phone. “What’s the address?”

“No, it’s fine. We’re fine with walking.”

“Heather, get in.”

“We’re almost there anyway.”

The car inched along. She could reach out and touch the passenger door.

“Heather, your feet hurt like hell. Come on.”

Her feet *did* hurt, but Heather didn’t respond. She only shook her head and glanced down at Wyatt who stared up at her, eyes wide, panic etched across his face.

Car or walk? If she got in the car what would she say? There was no address, but Roger probably knew that already. Could she call someone? Who would she call? Does this warrant a call to the police? Would they even answer? Would the police do anything about this?

“Mommy,” Wyatt whispered, eyes still wide. “My feet hurt.”

She could’ve smacked herself. She didn’t realize, in her thoughts, that her own son would be in pain. The Subaru inched along out the corner of her eye and she felt Roger’s stare on her, but she hiked the overnight bag higher up her shoulder and bent down to pick up Wyatt. She set him on her hip and a new idea popped in her mind.

“His feet hurt, Heather. What were you thinking, making him walk that far?” Roger spat those words out, like this was all her fault, like he hadn’t reduced his wife and son to shadows of themselves over the past year. Heather ignored him, risking so much by focusing solely on her son and the road ahead. “Fine. Walk. But I’ll be here to make sure you get him there.”

He knew.

Turning her face away from Roger, Heather murmured in Wyatt’s ear, “Hold on to me.”

Wyatt did. Like a vise. Like he knew what she would do. Her smart boy.

She had to wait for the right moment. Up ahead was a busier street. Herron Avenue and the bridge connecting Lawrenceville to Polish Hill. There was a small home there, in Polish Hill. They’d stay there—if there was room for them.

Heather kept walking, enduring the creeping of Roger’s car and his eyes on her head. Her heart pounded. The squeal of tires drew closer. Ahead, the intersection of Herron and Liberty swarmed with headlights, each traveler zig-zagging around each other. She stopped at the crosswalk, angling her body to the right but digging her right foot into the concrete, arm straining and tingling from holding Wyatt and keeping the bag around her shoulder.

As soon as the crosswalk blinked white, she ran.

Not to the right, as she had hoped angling to the right would suggest, but to the left, across the street and to the far side, up the bridge and across.

Roger wasn't in the right lane. Traffic was too dense. He'd either have to risk his own neck and cut across traffic or wait to turn around.

Heather didn't give another thought as her feet hit the sidewalk on the other side of the street. She didn't think as her ears caught a shout: "Heather!" Didn't think as Wyatt held on with every ounce of strength he had, as her right arm burned with his weight.

In the back of her mind, she heard the screech of car tires, but didn't turn around. A breeze swept past her, moving her legs faster and carrying her toward the end of the bridge. She couldn't stop and give Wyatt another night of poor sleep. This chance to be anywhere else was as much for him as it was for her.

Overnight bag flailing, she stepped off the bridge and onto flat, solid ground. She figured Roger had enough time to punch the steering wheel and turn around. By the light of streetlights, Heather ducked behind a building and nestled Wyatt and herself in the brush behind some dumpsters. Plenty of trees blocked out the light from the building, hiding them from headlights. Beads of sweat dripped down her back and face. Her breath slowed. Neither dared breathe too loud.

Wyatt turned to whisper in her ear but whipped his head forward as the sound of a car rumbled over the bridge, moving slowly, as if to catch someone. The headlights flickered through the trees and Heather and Wyatt sunk further in the brush.

Moments passed and the headlights moved on. Mother and son gripped each other, breath slowing. Wyatt tucked his head in the space between her neck and shoulder.

Heather looked down at Wyatt and pushed his sweaty blond hair out of his eyes. She wiped a small tear away. "Sweetheart, you did so well."

Wyatt sniffed and gave her a watery smile. "Thanks, Mommy."

"I'm so proud of you."

He curled himself on her lap and said, "You ran pretty fast."

Heather chuckled, wrapping an arm around him. They sat for long moments, anticipating the growl of an engine. It was completely dark with only a sprinkle of light from the building by the time Wyatt said, "Are we staying here tonight?"

Heather chuckled again and pulled out her phone. "No. There's a place up here we could go." She'd heard of the home from a friend of a friend, only in passing, not out of necessity.

Now was as good a time as any to visit.

Heather stood on shaking legs, gripped the strap of the overnight bag, and reached to take Wyatt's hand. Her button down stuck to her lower back. "We'll have to be careful though. It's not far, but Daddy could see us and want us to come back."

She took Wyatt out from behind the building—a bar—and through the parking lot, one eye on the cars around them, the other on her phone. They walked in silence by the lights of streetlamps.

Herron Avenue twisted up through Polish Hill, an aptly named neighborhood in Pittsburgh—Herron Avenue was long and steep. Streetlights cast their shadows on the sides of houses, and at the top of the hill Heather and Wyatt found themselves staring down a long, house-lined road. On Heather's phone, their dots were two blocks away from their sanctuary for the night.

Dark cars lined the street. Sunflowers burst from behind trash cans and recycling bins. Heather gave a reassuring smile to Wyatt. He looked up at her with tired eyes, his eyelids lowering. As they passed a car on the side of the street, she glanced through the open driver's window.

And froze up.

Roger grinned back through the open window. "It's a long walk to his friend's house, isn't it?"

His grin was like when he knew Heather was lying when she forgot to pick him up from his last day of work after he sold the second car. Like when she swore she didn't call her mom or text her sisters after their first awful fight at the beginning of this mess. He rarely saw past her lies and they both knew it.

Running so fast for so long took too much out of her. She took a step back, pushing Wyatt behind her. "His friend lives in Polish Hill." For her son, she'd be brave. But the shaking in her voice gave her away. "Leave us alone and let us walk, Roger."

"Why? Because of what happened tonight?" Roger shrugged. He pulled his baseball cap lower over his eyes. "That was nothing."

"If it were nothing, you'd leave us alone. You wouldn't have done any of that."

"Okay, I promise not to do any of that again if you get in the car. I'll take you home and then we'll talk."

She gazed at the line of dark houses surrounding them and narrowed in on one with a red sign planted in the front yard. It stood out like a beacon against the dark sky, watching them.

"He is your son, Roger. And I am your wife." She turned around and pushed Wyatt forward, urging him to go on, her legs and arms screaming to stop, to sit. "We won't get in the car. Not ever."

The house was there. Her heart lurched as Wyatt stumbled on tired feet. Roger scrambled out of the car as Heather tugged Wyatt along.

A split second later, warm hands on her wrist tugged her back, face-to-face with her husband. Wyatt froze behind Heather.

“You’re coming home with me.” Roger tossed a glance at Wyatt over her shoulder. “Both of you. I don’t want you yelling and getting people’s attention. It was a mistake.” He ducked his head, peeking up at her from behind the rim of his hat. He tugged on her wrist. “Come on, baby. Let’s go.”

A flash of a memory burst through her mind and Heather caught a glimpse of this family a year and a half ago. During one of the biggest thunderstorms Pittsburgh had ever seen, Wyatt was scared to death and Roger had the brilliant idea of all three of them making homemade macaroni and cheese together. Wyatt’s favorite. Roger stretched a string of melted cheese as long as Wyatt. Wyatt laughed so hard he started crying. Heather’s heart had swelled enough for it to hurt.

Maybe it *was* a mistake. He was so stressed after all. Those words and those cries had never happened before. Maybe Roger was right and she was overreacting. She could go home tonight, her and Wyatt, and they’d talk with Roger. A long talk, not a chat. They could regrow. Now was a mess, but later could be good. He was only stressed.

Heather deflated. Her shoulders drooped. He was right. He was always right. He always won.

She allowed Roger to pull her forward. She turned to reach for Wyatt with her free hand, his face blank with disbelief, with betrayal. Her heart cracked in half. She would try. Once more.

She winked at him, out of sight from Roger. Wyatt hesitated before grabbing her hand.

“That’s right. Come on,” Roger said, letting go of Heather’s wrist to open the car door. Heather fingered the strap of the overnight bag.

It’s easy to be defensive when you’ve lost. Defense is the only way to regain pride from defeat. People take advantage of those who lost. But winning lowers the winner’s guard. If Roger won, how would Heather stand up to him when this happened again?

Roger wasn’t watching Heather’s hand creeping farther up the strap of her bag.

Letting go of Wyatt’s hand, she gripped the overnight bag, heavy with travel shampoo, sippy cups, and snacks and threw it at Roger’s head with both hands. It wasn’t enough to drop him, but it was enough to leave him staggering. They had time. Leaving the bag on the ground, she grabbed Wyatt, held him to her chest once again, and sprinted for the house only yards away, though her legs could’ve easily passed for jelly.

3200 Herron Avenue. The Sanctuary.

Heavy footsteps behind her told her Roger had recovered, but she didn’t slow, even though her feet screamed at her to stop.

“Help!” She aimed her voice at the yellow door of the Sanctuary. “Somebody! Help!”

Immediately, a light in the upstairs window blinked on. Heather passed the fence surrounding the perimeter of the front yard and stumbled up the paint-chipped front stairs. The hall light winked on. Then the porch light.

Roger skidded to a halt as the door flung open.

Heather blinked in the bright light. Her eyes adjusted to a small woman in a nightgown with graying brown hair. Wordlessly, the woman reached forward, a cool hand on Heather's burning wrist, and brought Heather and Wyatt inside. The woman turned to face Roger.

Heather closed her eyes and leaned against the wall, holding Wyatt tighter to her chest. She whispered through his quiet sobs, "It's okay. It's okay. We made it." Her ears strained to hear the conversation between Roger and the small woman.

Roger's voice lightened. "Excuse me, ma'am. I need to take Heather back home. Can you tell her to come back out?"

Heather shook her head, silently pleading to the woman to ignore Roger.

The woman's shadow reflected on the front door. With one hand braced on the door she said, "Sir, quiet down. You're being too loud."

And shut the door.

Golabki

$\frac{2}{3}$ c cooked white rice
 2 heads green cabbage
 2 eggs, beaten
 1 $\frac{1}{2}$ lbs ground beef
 1 c chopped onion
 1 tsp salt
 $\frac{1}{4}$ tsp pepper
 8 slices bacon, 1-in. pieces
 2 16-oz. cans tomatoes 2 bay leaves
 2 8-oz. cans tomato sauce

Remove core from cabbage. Remove 8-12 leaves.
 Chop remaining cabbage and put in
 baking dish, sprinkle with salt. Boil
 cabbage leaves 5 min, drain and rinse. Cut
 about 2 in. of center vein from leaves.
 Cook bacon with $\frac{1}{2}$ c onion until bacon
 is crisp. Stir in drained tomatoes, tomato
 sauce, bay leaf. Simmer covered. Remove leaves.
 Combine cooked rice, egg, ground beef,
 remaining $\frac{1}{2}$ c onion, 1 tsp salt, pepper.
 Place $\frac{1}{4}$ c rice mixture in center of
 cabbage leaf, fold in sides and roll ends
 over rice.

Place rolls, seam side down on chopped
cabbage.

Pour tomato mixture over.

Cover and bake at 350° from 1 $\frac{1}{4}$ -1 $\frac{1}{2}$ hrs.

GOLĄBKI

Anna woke Ruta up at 7 o'clock in the morning.

"I have to make four dishes and a dessert for the party tonight and you're helping." Anna whipped the covers off Ruta's little preteen body. Goosebumps raised on Ruta's legs. "Get up, wash your face, meet me downstairs when you're done."

After washing and drying her face (all in 30 seconds), Ruta followed melting butter and frying onions down the stairs and into the kitchen. Food cluttered every centimeter of work space. Ruta eyed shiny, red sauce dripping to the floor from a spoon hanging over the edge of the counter; Anna had already spilled something. Anna threw her daughter a stained apron and pointed to an empty pot on the stove. "Start you off with something easy—fill that with water and let it boil."

Ruta did. Cold water ran out of the faucet and drummed into the pot, spiraling out to fill halfway. As Ruta heaved the pot back on the stove, Anna held a silver spoon to Ruta's lips filled with the shiny, red sauce. "What's missing?"

Ruta took the spoon from Anna's hand and tasted the red liquid swirling on the spoon. Tomato-ey. Basil-ey. Tilting her head, she looked up at her mother and said, "Salt."

"Right." Anna took the spoon back and ruffled her daughter's short, light brown hair. If it weren't for the age and height differences, they could be the same person. "How would you like to cut something?"

Ruta's grin stretched from ear to ear. "Really?"

"Sure. You're 12. I think you're old enough."

Ruta's smile grew wider and she clapped her hands together. "What can I cut?"

Anna led her to the counter where a head of cabbage sat on a cutting board, dripping with water. A notecard lay next to the board. A paring knife next to the card.

"You're making another one of *babcia's* recipes. Straight from Poland." Anna pointed to the recipe card. "Gołąbki. It's stuffed cabbage."

Ruta's eyes skimmed over the notecard. Her mother's inked cursive writing was hard to read. She ground her teeth, nervous about the cutting and the boiling and the folding. "Is it good?"

"Remember our trip to Poland last year? *Ciocia* made it then and you said you couldn't get enough of it. *Babcia* made it with me a couple of years ago and I thought I could help you with it today."

Skimming through all the food she ate when her aunt and uncle had hosted Ruta and her parents for two weeks in *Zamość*, Ruta didn't remember stuffed cabbage, but echoes of laughter and fresh baked bread at the dinner table bumped against her mind. She grinned and looked back at the recipe card. "What do I do first?"

Spinning on her heels, Anna turned back to the mess in the kitchen. “What does the recipe say?”

“Remove core from cabbage.”

From over her shoulder, Anna asked, “Do you know what the core is?”

Ruta turned the cabbage over. “This hard, white part?”

“That’s the one.”

Ruta reached for the paring knife next to the board and gripped it. She’d had to wait for so long before she was allowed to cut things that she didn’t know where to begin. Her mother wouldn’t tell her what to do: this was a test for Ruta only. Sticking the blade of the knife where the leaves meet the core, Ruta anchored the head with her other hand, careful to keep her hand out of reach from the blade. She took slow, careful slices, her kid muscles working hard to cut and keep the cabbage balanced. Soon enough, the core was loose. Ruta lifted it out of the empty cavity.

As if she had eyes on the back of her head, Anna turned around. “So. How’d it go?”

Ruta held the core-less cabbage up. “Good.”

The corner of Anna’s mouth tilted up. “Get to it.”

For the rest of the morning, Ruta carefully unwrapped cabbage leaves, boiled them, chopped onions, chopped bacon, mixed ground meat and seasoning, and wrapped the meat mixture in the cabbage leaves. Chopping onions made her eyes burn, Anna showed her only once how to fold cabbage leaves properly, and Ruta decided onions frying in oil was her favorite smell. Sweet and spicy. Buttery.

Knocking the wooden spoon against the pan to loosen onions was the beat of a drum. Scraping the meat from the glass bowl with a metal measuring cup was the chime of a triangle. Boiling water kept her in time. Ruta moved to the stove to give the onions a stir, Anna grabbed spices from the spice cupboard. Anna moved to the stove to fry kielbasa, Ruta grabbed a bowl from the cupboard. They spun around each other, bounced off of each other.

They created a rhythm, Anna and Ruta. And Ruta liked it.

THE MOBILE

Nellie's heart could burst from her chest. Lurching to her aching feet, she stumbled down the hallway, bracing a shaking hand on the wall for support. Halting at the door separating her from her newborn, an image of Michelle choking on her own saliva forced itself through her mind. Michelle falling out of her cradle. Her plastic mobile falling down and crashing onto her soft, little head. Nellie placed a burning hand on the cool doorknob and pushed it wide open.

No sound. No noise at all. On silent feet and bated breath, Nellie crept to the hand-me-down cradle and peered in.

Little Michelle, hair the same deep black as hers and as curly, skin the same dark umber as her own, lay there with her eyes closed. Michelle was too still. Too peaceful. Nellie reached down, hand shaking, heart pounding to feel for breath.

There.

Puffs of air. A rising chest. She looked again.

Small beats of air hit her hand from her little girl's nose. Michelle's chest rose and fell, so quietly, so gently, Nellie hadn't noticed in her panicked state. She let out her own breath. Her shoulders drooped. Nellie looked down at her five-week-old daughter, her smooth, sweet-smelling baby skin. Nellie and her daughter were 19 years apart, but Michelle already looked so much like Nellie, her drooping deep-blue eyes the only feature of her father. Tiny fingers curled around Nellie's, her daughter conscious of her mother even through sleep.

The invisible bond between Nellie and her daughter had Nellie sobbing one moment, laughing the next. A tiny light could be winked out of existence so easily. This small and precious life, gone.

A wave of nausea sent her rocking forward. Nellie sank to the ground and curled her legs under her as darkness hovered in the corners of her eyes, threatening to overwhelm her. Eyes laser-focused on her baby girl, she braced her hands on the carpeted floor to let the nausea and the darkness pass.

How dare he how dare he how dare he abandon her abandon me

Nellie surveyed the small bedroom. Water glasses and dirty plates had been long forgotten. Crinkled laundry needed folding. No time. Doctor Smith told her to start with one dish, one article of clothing. It didn't work. If she took her eyes off of Michelle for one second, images flashed in her mind of her daughter choking in her sleep, the cradle breaking, her blanket tying itself around her throat.

This is what happens when the boy you think you love takes one look at the result of a drunken night and abandons you in the middle of a deep recession, the worst since the Depression. That boy took one look at this sweet, beautiful, accident sleeping in her hospital bassinet and abandoned her—abandoned them. And here Nellie was in her tiny one-bedroom apartment, savings running to a bone-chilling amount, scared to death of leaving her daughter.

Nellie should take a nap, but even closing her eyes was too damn exhausting. She was so *tired*.

But she was awake, at Michelle's beck and call. Even if it made her want to curl up in a ball of blankets and never leave her safe cocoon again.

Nellie *should* check her phone for job openings, wrangle together money for rent, put her clothes away, but her eyes and nose stung once she gave another peek into Michelle's cradle.

From above, directly over Michelle, the gentle clink of plastic fish swirled over her newborn's head, cutting cleanly through the air like water. The mobile was a gift from Nellie's father. Nellie followed the pink fish with her eyes, searching for a distraction from the blizzard in her brain. She followed the electronic mobile, the pink fish, around in a circle, a circle, a circle, a circle. The pink fish stopped, hovering directly over Michelle's soft head. The blue fish stopped, swaying once before stilling completely. The green fish stopped, its scales glinting in the glow of Michelle's night light.

A chill rippled through Nellie.

And, with wide eyes, she watched as the hook securing the mobile to the ceiling vanished.

Her limbs were deep in peanut butter, too heavy, too weak. But she surged forward, struggling against the dense air to catch the mobile plummeting toward Michelle's barely-formed head. The fish grinned and waved at Nellie as they fell, gaining speed.

This is it. This is when she goes.

With her arms outstretched to catch the mobile, Nellie buried her stomach in the lip of the cradle, smashing against the bars. Michelle jolted awake, the plastic fish two inches from her nose.

But once Nellie blinked, everything is still—the mobile is still hanging from the ceiling and Michelle's eyes are closed and her chest is still rising and falling, rising and falling.

Nellie burst into silent tears. She fell to the floor with her back against the wall. Nellie took shallow breaths as her tears dropped onto her worn-out jeans. A fist tightened around her heart. Nellie gripped her hair in her fists and gritted her teeth against the pressure in her chest. *Every breath* from Michelle could be her last. *Every coo* could be her last. *Every wail from her lungs* could be her last.

Unable to contain the overwhelming tightness in her chest, she let out a sharp sob, her face tight, her lips salty. Nellie stilled her breathing and her eyes shot to the baby in the cradle. Michelle stirred, but a tiny, barely noticeable smile split through her puckered lips—Michelle dreamed of goodness and lightness, not the salt of her own tears.

Good.

Michelle looked *so much* like Nellie. Already. Leaning against the paint-cracked wall of her bedroom, she stared at her daughter, analyzed every inch of her baby girl's skin, her dark hair,

her puffy cheeks, her ladybug-sized fingernails until her eyes dried. A grin cut through Nellie's weepy face, the corners of her mouth quivering to stay turned upward.

It was ridiculous, really, to think of the end.

Pacuki

4 c flour

2 c boiling milk

1 pkt. dry yeast

 $\frac{1}{4}$ c lukewarm milk

6 egg yolks

 $\frac{1}{2}$ c sugar $\frac{1}{2}$ vanilla bean pod, split and scraped

2 tsp orange zest

 $\frac{1}{2}$ c butter, melted

flour, filling, lard for frying

Put 1 c of flour into boiling milk.

Remove from heat, beat until smooth. Cool.

Dissolve yeast in $\frac{1}{4}$ c milk. Add to flour mixture. Stir and let stand half an hour.

Cream egg yolks and sugar, add vanilla and orange zest. Stir into dough when it rises.

Add remaining flour and butter, beat until sticky dough forms. Cover and let stand

45-60 min, until doubled. Knead on floured surface. Divide dough in half, roll to $\frac{1}{2}$ -in

thick. Cut out circles. Cover and let rise for 30 min. Fry in lard, 4 min @ 340°. Drain and cool. Fill. Sprinkle with powdered sugar and serv.

PAĆZKI

Students flickered through the four o'clock sunlight filtering through the trees on Mount Mercy College's campus. Their satchels thumped against their backs as they walked to and from class, chatting with friends about exams and the upcoming weekend.

The warm fall weather was perfect for sitting on benches, catching up on readings, but Ruta was here, in the sedan with her mother, watching classmates and oak trees stream past. She leaned her head against the cool window.

As Anna turned onto Fifth Avenue, she said, "Maybe we should make another appointment for you. A different doctor." From the corner of her eye, Ruta saw Anna glance at her staring out the window. "The one we went to was obviously a quack."

Silence from the passenger-seat.

"Maybe it's a good thing you'll be studying at home. Less pressure, more space, better food." Anna shrugged. Her metal necklaces jangled. "We'll have time to figure this out before you graduate."

The sedan rumbled over the road, shifting Ruta's luggage in the trunk. She lifted her head off the window and leaned it against the perfume-stained headrest, shoulders tensing to keep her head from falling to the side. Her hands sat, palms up, in her lap. Anna's words scratched against Ruta's ears.

"I'm having my book club over this week, by the way. Maybe you can help me make some appetizers. Maybe paćzki—your favorite." Ruta's luggage slid along the floor as the sedan slowed to a stop at an intersection. "Your dad will be happy to see you. He gets back from Poland in two days."

Pressure against her leg. Ruta shifted her eyes to see her mother patting her knee. Anna's poofy brown hair shook as she leaned over to Ruta and said, "We'll figure this out. All of us. Your dad and I will be there through it all."

If Ruta was okay, if she was comfortable, if she was able to *think*, she might have replied. But she couldn't wrestle enough energy to open her mouth. Or turn her head a centimeter to look fully into her mother's golden-brown eyes. Or listen.

The pressure on her leg lifted. Anna returned her hand to the steering wheel and was silent the rest of the drive home.

Deconstructed sandwiches were the only thing she could manage in her lows. Her roommate, Sue, stared at her from across the room as Ruta grabbed a head of lettuce and bit into it, simultaneously shoving slices of turkey and cheese in her mouth. A bite of bread. A bite of tomato. Chewed. Swallowed.

Repeat.

In the back of her mind, Ruta figured this was an odd sight for Sue. Sue knew her long enough to know how much Ruta loved cooking; she'd usually make a real sandwich. But for now, food is food.

Ruta ignored Sue's wide eyes and continued switching between lettuce and cheese and bread and turkey, staring at breadcrumbs that had fallen to the table. The best part is not having dishes to wash. She can shove everything back in the refrigerator and shuffle back to bed in her night dress and tangled brown hair, neither of which had been washed in over a week.

Overdue library books sat stacked on her desk. An ink-blotted stack of papers lay next to the books. She missed a week's worth of classes and didn't finish a research paper that was due three days ago. Ruta sent her professor a letter telling her she was sick and wouldn't be able to finish the paper in time, and her professor gave her an extension but Ruta still won't finish it. The last time Ruta had been to the library was last week and she had stayed for 8 hours. No coffee. No tea.

From behind her closed door, the muffled sound of Sue moving around the apartment sent prickles up her arms. She smashed her face into the mattress and tugged her pillow over her head, drowning out the soft clink of dishes, the creak of wood floors, the light snap of cabinets closing.

Every sound, every glare of light was drowning in too much.

The door flew open. The lights flicked on and seared her bare arms.

Ruta blinked up at Sue standing in the doorway. "What?"

Sue took a step in, her straight, black hair swinging forward. "What's going on?"

Ruta didn't answer but propped herself up on her elbows. A blue and green stain of light danced in front of her eyes, blocking her from seeing Sue properly.

"You were *literally* dancing around the campus last week. What happened to you?" Sue stood with her hands on her hips, a frazzled look on her face.

What could Ruta say? She didn't know what *this* was. "I don't know. Nothing. This happens sometimes. I'm fine."

Sue raised her eyebrow. "I'm the queen of England."

"Really. I'm fine."

They stared at each other in their stubbornness for a solid 10 seconds. Sue relented.

"I'm calling your mother."

Two days later, Anna and Ruta did indeed make *paçzki*—sweet cheese, raspberry, and rose hip. Anna heaved the sugar jar over to the table where Ruta sat with a mixing bowl and a measuring cup next to her limp hand. Ruta stared at the sugar crystals winking in the dim kitchen light.

“I can’t imagine you not helping me in the kitchen, even now. None of this will be difficult.” Anna pointed to the mixing bowl. “Half a cup of sugar in there. Six egg yolks.”

Inching her chair back, Ruta stood to grab the carton of eggs from the refrigerator, but Anna shook her head. “Stay there. I’ll get them.”

Without letting a single piece of shell fall, Anna separated the egg yolks from the egg whites and let the yolks fall into the mixing bowl. She plugged in their yellow GE hand mixer and gave it to Ruta who held the mixer with enough force to keep it upright and watched the crystals blend into the yolks, the whorls shining like diamonds.

She looked up to see Anna frowning, watching, surveying, analyzing with furrowed brows. Her mother raised her eyebrows in question. Ruta gave her a tiny smile, just a lift of the corner of her mouth, but that was enough for Anna to share Ruta’s slight smile, deflate in relief, and hand her daughter vanilla extract. And a small bowl of orange zest.

If Anna could grab onto Ruta a little longer, her daughter would be okay again.

So Ruta sat at the kitchen table, if only for her mother’s sake, measuring butter and flour and raspberry jam. She held the mixer in her loose hand, until her shoulders became a fraction less tense and her hands became a little more sure. Her smile didn’t grow, but even so, she remained in the kitchen with her mother, relieved to be there, even if the noise of the mixer still stabbed her in the arms.

CHOCOLATE MILK BUBBLES

Wyatt giggled. Chocolate milk bubbles exploded out of his plastic cup and splashed onto the otherwise clean plastic placemat. He poked a brown bubble with the tip of his finger. He blew more air into his curly straw, sending bubbles shooting up and spilling over the lip of the cup. The strange woman who rescued Mommy and him was in the other room; she wouldn't know.

His stuffed duck was beside him, of course.

Footsteps echoed in the hallway. Wyatt's heart started running and he scrambled to clean up.

"What happened here?" A voice said in the teasing tone Mommy uses when Wyatt was in trouble but not *really* in trouble.

Wyatt ducked his head, glancing at the white tennis shoes standing to the side.

The strange woman grabbed a dishcloth from the sink and wiped the chocolate milk from the table, blotching the rag brown. She tapped her fingers on the table. Wyatt looked up. "I'm only teasing you. Look how quickly I cleaned it up." She gave Wyatt a gentle smile. "You can keep blowing bubbles if you'd like. I'll leave the rag here."

She winked and turned to the counter. Sandwiches sat wrapped in paper, tied with a thin cord. The woman placed them on a tray. Wyatt glanced at his cup of chocolate milk in confusion, hand curling around his duck.

As the woman left the kitchen with the tray, she stopped next to Wyatt and nodded. "Really."

He listened to her footsteps fade away. In the silence of the house, Wyatt slid his cup of milk a conspiratorial grin. More bubbles spilled over the lip of the cup. Like the chocolate milk bubbles bursting over, bubbles rose in his belly and burst.

He cracked up.

Wyatt's laughter bounced against the walls. He clamped his lips tight, hoping the strange woman didn't hear. But once he started, he couldn't stop. He liked it—laughing. It was wrong to him, though, after months of screams and tears, like laughing shouldn't be allowed anymore. Tiny giggles broke through his lips. He swirled his chocolate milk with his curly straw and took a gulp, looking up at movement in the corner of his eye.

He ran over to the window. "Mommy!"

"Hey, Wyatt. Whatcha doing?"

"Blowing chocolate milk bubbles."

His mommy grinned back at him from where she stood in the backyard with a wrapped sandwich in her hand. Green stuff poked out from between slices of bread. "I hope you're not making a mess."

Wyatt shook his head. Behind his mom, the strange woman passed sandwiches out to the other women sitting in lawn chairs. “*She* gave me a rag to clean up.” He pointed at the woman.

His mom followed his raised finger. “Ruta, honey.”

“Yeah.”

“Well, I hope you’re enjoying yourself. Come outside whenever you’re ready.”

“Okay,” Wyatt said, though he probably won’t. He didn’t know any of those women outside. He’d rather be inside with chocolate milk, his stuffed duck, and a bin full of toys in the living room. He let his mom go back to the other women and took his duck to the living room.

Perfect. He plopped himself on the ground in front of the bin and pulled toys out at random. A small container of Lego blocks. A Buzz Lightyear figure. Some stuffed animals—his duck’s playmates.

Wyatt sat in the quiet of the house. His ears rang with silence and his hands gripped Buzz Lightyear as if this was the last time seeing him. If he looked through the window, he could see the road outside. But he won’t look. If he saw his daddy, the chocolate milk would go down the drain. The toys would return to the bin.

It was too much. So Wyatt ignored the window, facing his back to the road.

The spring-loaded screen door that led to the backyard opened and slammed shut. Without warning, Wyatt’s heart beat faster. His daddy was angry—Wyatt could tell by the way the door slammed. Wyatt shut his eyes, waiting for his dad to throw words at him again. Wyatt planted his hands flat on the ground, ready to run to his mom.

Wyatt’s eyes flew open. *I forgot to clean up my milk mess!*

He turned his body to face the hall leading to the kitchen and lay on his side, belly hurting and heart racing. He grabbed his stuffed duck with a weak hand. His other toys forgotten, he wrapped an arm around his belly and waited for his daddy to yell at him about leaving a mess on the kitchen table again. He waited for his mommy to shield him again.

But nothing came. Not a word.

Just the crinkle of paper-wrapped sandwiches from the kitchen. And footsteps. Wyatt looked up.

His daddy stood in the doorway, hands on his hips. Wyatt’s lip trembled as his wide eyes travelled to his daddy’s red face.

“Wyatt? Are you alright?” The woman—Ruta, not his daddy, *not his daddy*—stood in the doorway with his forgotten cup of milk. She moved forward on silent feet and crouched in front of Wyatt. “Do you need something?”

She talked to him just like his mommy did.

He ran his finger over the little tuft of fur on his duck’s head. And whispered, “I thought you were my daddy.”

Ruta sighed, a rush of thin air pouring over Wyatt. She set the chocolate milk on the coffee table. "I'm sorry." She brought herself forward until she was sitting on her legs and said, from a distance away to give him space, "I don't think I told you this yet, but you are very brave. To leave with your mommy and come here."

Wyatt nodded.

"Your mommy told me all about it. Only the bravest and strongest little boy could do something like that." Ruta gave him a small smile.

Wyatt returned her smile, the pain in his stomach easing a little. A burst of laughter from outside reminded him of his mom. "Can I go to Mommy?"

"Of course. I was just about to go outside." Ruta braced her hand on the coffee table and stood. "Would you like to come with me?"

Wyatt nodded and pushed himself to his feet. He grabbed Ruta's hand, with his duck in the other, and walked outside with the woman who saved his mommy and him. Ruta introduced him to Denise and Sue and Kathy and Clara and gave them each a small wave as brave boys should.

But when his mommy held him in her lap with his cheek pressed into her chest, he didn't move until it was time for dinner.

Aparlotka
2 c flour
1 c sugar
3/4 tsp baking powder
9 Tbsp butter
1 egg
2 egg yolk
2 1/4 lbs G. Smith apples, peeled, cored, grated
1/2 tsp cinnamon
ground almonds

Oven to 350°
Combine flour, sugar, baking powder.
Cut in butter until it resembles coarse meal.
Add egg and egg yolk, cover and refrigerate
for 30 min.
Pat 2/3 crust into 9-in springform pan,
covering bottom and sides.
Add ground almonds.
Toss apples in cinnamon and add to pan.
Crumble remaining 1/3 crust and sprinkle over
apples.
Bake for 5 min. or until crust is light brown.

THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN HIGH AND LOW

Ruta hadn't had more than four hours of sleep in as many days. Every time she'd lay her head on her new satin pillowcase, all she could think about was Carole King and szarlotka and she'd be up again, grabbing an unwashed apron and her *Tapestry* record.

Flour coated the countertops. Small globs of dough streaked through her short hair. Potato peels covered the sink, the floor. Ruta's heart beat too quickly for her to care. Her refrigerator burst with Tupperware containers and Ball jars. She bought another one yesterday—another refrigerator. To hold all the food she'd been making. A *red* refrigerator.

Setting her full wine glass down, Ruta smiled to herself as she sautéed onions and mushrooms in a shallow pan. Her hips swayed to King.

I feel the earth move under my feet, I feel the sky tumblin' down

The refrigerator was filled with sweets, as many sweets as Ruta knew. Tiny gingerbread men with white buttercream frosting, a perfectly rolled makowiec, pączki, all courtesy of her mother and her grandmother and her great-grandmother. And the pies. Blueberry, raspberry, rhubarb, chocolate, lemon.

This was all she'd been eating for a week. Pie.

There were a couple of Tupperware containers of bigos and pierogi, simple enough. In front of Ruta and her smudged bright blue eyeshadow were two different types of dough: pie dough (for another chocolate pie) and puff pastry for a second batch of beef wellington. She switched between both doughs every so often. Pie dough is pie dough, but the beef wellington had intimidated her for years until, two days ago, she found a recipe for the dish in a magazine at her doctor's office. She tore out the recipe, left her doctor's office, and immediately gathered the ingredients. She couldn't stop thinking about the flavors, the technique.

Ruta folded the pie dough once, pounded it back down, and turned it 90 degrees. Fold. Punch. Turn. Fold. Punch. Turn.

I feel my heart start to tremblin' whenever you're around

Tiny blue feathers were sewn into her light-pink short-sleeve silk shirt. The little wisps of polyester blew from the breeze through the window. She bought it yesterday. Found it in a second-hand shop. Ruta couldn't help it. She felt so good about herself. So sure and confident and clever. She was a goddess, then and always.

Ruta caught a glance of herself in the little mirror she hung right above the sink. She grinned and blew herself a kiss. She spent a full hour on her hair alone today.

She was a wall of pure iron. She could walk on water.

Ruta was *it*.

Ruta was so good she invested all of her money in a little startup her friend of a friend told her about. This friend of a friend was new to business but *so confident*. Ruta invested all of

her money except what she needed to buy groceries. If Ruta invested in the startup, it *must* be a good idea.

Ruta turned an impressive pirouette and reached for the oven door. A blast of hot air hit her in the face. The feathers on her shirt waved. She blew the heat away, more concerned about the perfect sizzling and browning of her first batch of beef wellington.

She giggled. “You look perfect.”

As the beef wellington sat on the stovetop, waiting to be eaten, Ruta called George. They’d have a dinner date. And she could tell him all about King and her shirt and the startup she invested in and they could have pie and pączki.

Ruta bounced on her toes, peeking around the corner to her bedroom, where a pale pink negligee hung on her door handle, too lacey and frilly and absurd for her to buy if she was in her right mind.

My emotions are something I just can't tame I've just got to have you baby

She dialed George’s number.

“George Murphy.”

“It’s Ruta.” Her cheeks burned. “Come over.”

“Now?”

“Yes.”

“What’s that you’re listening to? Is that King?” Ruta could *hear* George’s grin. “Hey, you must be in a good mood again. Are you cooking?”

“Of course. That’s all I’ve been doing for the past four days.” Ruta untied her apron. George’s car keys chimed in the background. “Hurry up. Come over before all of this goes away again.”

Ruta stared up at George’s two-story house in Shadyside, taking in the green yard and the clean windows. She’d been living in Lawrenceville for years now, and she’s rarely cleaned her windows. She bit her lip, envying those sparkling windows.

This was only the third time she’d been to his house. He told her his house was too nice for her—for someone who hurls wine glasses at the wall. Shaking away his words, Ruta gritted her teeth and marched to the door. She pressed a shaking finger to the door knocker.

Ruta had heard enough about his parents, Parker and Ellen Murphy, for her to be nervous, even if this was a dinner party. Just a simple dinner—

The wooden door flung open and George waved for Ruta to walk through. He pressed a light kiss to her temple. “Right on time. Everyone’s waiting for you in the dining room.” He closed the door behind Ruta and led her through his house.

George's house was exactly how she remembered it—straight forward, practical, logical. A table, a chair, a couch. A window. A picture frame. Down a long hallway was George's dining room. And inside was George's grim and primed family, sitting on red velvet chairs that had been pushed into a circle, the dining table to the side.

Immediately, Ruta's stomach dropped.

This can't be a dinner.

George stood to the side with his hands behind his back, rocking backward and forward in his loafers. Ruta clutched the strap of her bag and looked around at George's parents and siblings, not looking them in the eye for too long.

"Um, Ruta," George said, glancing around the circle. He held his hand toward a bald man and a brunette woman with curls about a foot off her head. "These are my parents." He pointed to two others with the same brown hair as the woman. "And my brother and sister."

Ruta nodded her head at each person, words gone.

"Well, Ruta," George's father—Parker—said, "Take a seat and we'll get started."

"With what?"

George's mother—Ellen—tossed perfumed hair out of her face. Her heavy earrings chimed. "George told us about your problem."

"My what?"

"Your problem." Ellen glanced at George. "Your mood swings and how they affect your work."

Ruta's mouth fell open. She whipped her face toward her boyfriend. "You told them?"

"Don't get hysterical." George jerked his thumb over his shoulder at his parents. "It was *their* idea. My siblings and I were dragged along."

The floor rippled under Ruta's feet and deep pressure built behind her eyes, weighing her down, but she shuffled to an empty chair anyway, not trusting her feet to lead her away from the circle. She avoided her boyfriend's eyes as she sat. George stared at the carpeted floor.

Parker cleared his throat and began. "Ruta, George said you were bedridden for over a week. Now you're spending days in the kitchen instead of working." He shook his head. "I won't even mention that startup." He rested his elbows on the arms of his chair. His bald head shone in the light of the dining room chandelier. "We'd like to help."

"We must have a conversation about your predicament." Ellen. "Either find help at a respectable community health center or be sent to an institution."

The chair was swept under Ruta. A wave of nausea rippled through her. She gripped her upper arm, nails biting into her skin.

Institution.

Prison.

One of George's brothers spoke next. "We've heard about your irrational, unexpected behavior and the amount of wine you drink."

Ellen. "Which is far above the regular amount for a normal person."

George. "We're worried about you. That's all."

Normal.

Irrational.

Worried.

Institution.

Ruta shook her head and waved her arms in front of her as if wiping the idea away. The room spun. "No, it's fine. You don't need to do this."

Ellen leaned forward and placed a heavily-ringed hand on Ruta's knee. "Of course we do. This is for George and you. I've seen and heard of how your relationship with George hurts him. I can imagine how it hurts you."

Bracing a hand on the chair, Ruta turned on George who had been scuffing his loafers into the carpet. "It hurts you? You never told me that."

He crossed his arms and said, blinking up at the chandelier, "I just don't think you're taking good care of yourself."

Ruta, desperate to make a good impression on George's parents, clamped her lips shut to keep a scream from escaping. Once she had forced it down in her stomach, she said, "I can take care of myself. I'm the only one who knows how to."

"A couple weeks ago your mother found you asleep on your kitchen floor surrounded by a pile of glass and bread dough. She said you hadn't been answering the phone."

Ruta shut down.

From a hazy part of her mind, a pair of strong arms lifted her off the floor. In her exhausted state, from her blurred vision, her mother's face hovered in front of her, eyes wide with panic after phone calls unanswered. But not angry. Her mother helped her into bed with a glass of water and a sandwich.

Ruta's face fell. She never thanked her mother.

"You're drinking too much, you're not eating enough." Ruta was drowning and Ellen's voice was the weight of water. Her shoulders slumped from Ellen's words. "From what George has told us, you can barely keep your eyes open when you go out in public." Ellen leaned forward and rested her forearms on her knees. "You lost your most recent job. Ruta, that's three jobs in six months."

One of George's brothers had no reason, no validity, the audacity, to say, "You invested almost your entire last paycheck in those investments that, frankly, don't make sense. You could lose all that money. Don't you still pay rent?"

From the corner of her eye, she saw George shift in his chair. Maybe only minutes ago she would have yelled at him for telling his family everything, but Ruta stared down at her hands, her cheeks growing warmer with every accusation. Her own voice folded in on itself. Her eyes focused and unfocused on the swirling pattern in the dining room carpet. Those investments weren't risky if *Ruta* invested. Ruta was *it*.

She was it.

But now she doubted. So Ruta blocked the voices out. Like slamming a door.

All five of them sat in a circle around her, giving their own two cents to this investigation into her pathetic, pie-filled, irrational life. Ruta sat, letting their words wash over her.

"George can't do everything for you."

"Why can't you focus enough?"

"You're too emotional at work."

And the worst—

"What would Anna think?"

Reaching down for the strap of her leather bag, Ruta raised her head and met the eyes of the people around her. She nodded once, turned around, and walked down the hallway to the front door, pushing her legs forward like she was wading in thigh-high water. As she dug around in her purse for her keys, the scuff of loafers on carpet entered the hall.

"Ruta." George placed a hand on the doorknob. "What are you doing?"

"Leaving." Ruta wrapped her hand around her car keys. Her arms fell to her side.

Wait until you get home. Wait until you get home before sinking again.

"I hope it's not because of all of that." George gestured behind him, as if *he* hadn't been listening. What about— He slipped an arm around her waist and pulled her against him. His fingers brushed against her bare skin. "That night. With those donuts. And your lace...thing."

"Pączki."

"What?"

"Not donuts. Pączki."

"Yeah." George scrubbed the top of his head. "You're just...not like that anymore."

"Well, that's what happens."

“Not like this.” He tightened his grip on her waist. “When we met you acted all high and mighty. Sure of yourself. *Fun*. A couple weeks later and you start drinking and never get out of bed. A couple of weeks later you’re fun again. Then you lose your job. It’s like you’re constantly a different person.”

Ruta only looked in his eyes. *Wait until you get home, Ruta.*

“I don’t know,” George said, scratching his head again. “I guess I liked you better before.” His voice trailed off and he turned to face the window by the door. He shrugged. “I want you to be okay. I didn’t think talking to you like this would work, but maybe after a couple more tries you can get better.”

“Yeah, maybe.”

George’s eyes lit up. “Great! I’ll call you the next time we can all talk.”

He released her waist and opened the door, moving to the side. Ruta stepped over the threshold of the front door, let the door close behind her, and stood at the top of the stairs for at least 10 whole seconds before turning to the driveway. She walked on leaden feet down the stairs and to her car.

And Ruta put the key in the ignition and went home.

For six days, Ruta had only left her bed to get Saltine crackers and to use the bathroom. She hadn’t changed her clothes. Hadn’t showered. Curled in loose sheets, lights off. George hadn’t called to apologize. Or maybe he did. Ruta hadn’t answered the phone any time it rang. Briefly, Ruta had wanted to call her mother—not for help, but to hear another person’s voice. But her hands were too heavy.

In and out of sleep, George’s words flitted through her mind. She knew exactly what he meant by *before*. Rapid talking, constantly out of breath, an exhaustive, impulsive, invest-all-your-money way of living. Good and fun as that might have been, she wasn’t sure she could explain to him what it felt like. What it *still* feels like.

Like ants crawling up and down her body. Like she could peel her skin off, let it regenerate, and peel it off again. Like she could reach into her chest and rip out her lungs—no problem.

Perhaps she only drank wine because her entire soul—her whole being—was constantly on fire. George wouldn’t understand. So it was easier to let it pass. Easier to stay in bed and let the job searching wait for another week or two.

She jolted at the sound of the doorbell.

Ruta pulled the musty sheets closer. She dug her face into her oily pillowcase. The doorbell crashed in her skull. Ruta inched a hand out of her safe, warm cocoon and braced a hand on the mattress. Bringing reluctant strength into her arm, she pushed herself into a half-sitting, half-lying position, her body propped up by her elbow. She bent her legs. Brought herself into a

fully seated position. Little by little, she slid her legs out of the covers and onto the hardwood floor, all the while pushing past the frantic doorbell clanging in the distance.

But she didn't stand up. She slouched at the edge of her bed, loose sheets and blankets pooling around her waist. Expecting another clang from the doorbell, Ruta rocked forward, but instead of the bell, a key was put into the lock. Her eyes slid along the floor. The front door opened and a pair of high heels clicked through the apartment, making their way straight to her. They stopped at the threshold of her bedroom door.

Ruta blinked. "Mom?" Her voice was rough from a week of unuse.

"I called seven times, Ruta." There she stood, poofed brunette hair, bright green trousers, huge plastic earrings, a stack of filled Tupperware containers in her arms and Ruta's spare house key in her hand. Anna Laksa. At this moment, both a savior and an annoyance. Stepping over takeout boxes and dirty socks, Anna said, "What's going on?"

Anna set the Tupperware containers on Ruta's cluttered bedside table and narrowed her gaze on her daughter sitting at the edge of her bed with visibly dirty bed sheets around her. Anna turned back to face Ruta after scanning the laundry, dishes, mail left scattered around the room. Ruta said nothing as her mother's shoulders dropped. As if 30 tons of ocean water had been dumped on her. Anna's face crumpled. Ruta knew her mother would be staying the night.

"Oh honey." Her mother took a step closer. "It's happening again, isn't it?"

Ruta kept still, fingers curling around the edge of the sheet. She only stared into her mother's eyes. Anna's arms rose and then fell in hesitation. "Would you like something? Help? A hug?"

Biting her lip, Ruta's eyes shifted from one corner of her room to the other. Although Anna's words crawled up her arms and legs like spiders, Ruta relented. She nodded.

And Anna swarmed toward her daughter. Her small arms wrapped around her and squeezed her as if Ruta had almost fallen off a cliff.

Maybe she had.

Against Ruta's cheek, her mother whispered, "George told me everything."

Ruta grunted in acknowledgement.

"Do you want to talk about it?"

Ruta gave her mother a slight movement of her head, so subtle, but Anna saw it. Mother and daughter sat on Ruta's bed, wrinkled sheets and oily pillowcase and all as daughter spilled everything. About her harsh shifts from high energy to low energy, self-importance to self-denial, like the flick of a switch or a snap of the fingers. But each high and each low was self-destructive. Those risky investments George's brothers described flushed out her entire bank account, but Ruta's parents were made from money, and her bank account flooded again. In those highs, she invested time and money into outrageous circumstances, but her mind whirled around too quickly for her to stop. Momentum was strong. With every movement she made at the top of her spiral, a

piece of her soul broke off. She was smarter than all that. But her tight skin and rattling bones brought her to act on unfamiliar/familiar impulses.

After she was *it*, Ruta was nothing. Days, weeks in bed. Resting her head on her mother's lap, drifting in and out of sleep.

As Ruta talked, her mother stroked her hair and listened. She offered nothing but a gentle hand and open ears. So unlike George's failed intervention. Ruta told her about the investments, the jobs she lost, the daily outbursts of raw, unfiltered rage, those violent shifts, deconstructed ham sandwiches (slice of ham, untoasted bread, a whole tomato with bite marks in it), the sleeves of Saltines, Carole King, four days with no sleep, the obliterated wine glasses, the intervention.

When her throat dried and her eyes drooped from talking too much, Ruta let her lips fall shut. Her mother bent over, brown hair spilling over Ruta's face and pressed a light kiss to her daughter's temple. "Can I offer a suggestion? Don't agree unless you want to."

Ruta raised a finger for her mother to continue.

"I've said this before, but I know another doctor who can help. Who can *really* help. He's been helping people like you a lot and some women in my book club know him too. They trust him." Anna took a breath and finished her thoughts with small hesitations. "Would you like to talk to him? He might be able to help better than those other ones we went to."

Anna's words crawled up Ruta's skin. Ruta scratched her arms. She moved her head up and down, a small nod, and closed her eyes, letting her mother run her hand along Ruta's short brown hair. Their breath matched.

The middle of her chest squeezed so tightly, so intensely she couldn't breathe.

In her mother's arms, in the dark of her smelly, messy apartment, the corner of her mouth lifted. Just one corner. And barely. It was almost unnoticeable.

But Anna noticed. "I'm here Ruta. I'll stay."

Makowiec

1 c milk	10 dry. poppy seeds
4 tsp sugar	1/2 c sugar
2 packets yeast	2 tsp butter
4 c flour	2 egg whites
1 tsp salt	3 Tbsp honey
2 egg yolks	1 c ground raisins
1/4 c butter	1/2 tsp almond extract
1 tsp vanilla	1 egg
	1 Tbsp oil
for dough	for filling

Let poppy seeds soak overnight.

Heat milk to 110° and pour into lg. bowl.

Stir in sugar and yeast. Let sit for 5. min.

Stir in flour, salt, egg yolk, butter, vanilla and knead. Cover bowl, let rise 90 min.

Strain and grind poppy seeds.

Mix sugar, butter, egg whites, honey, ground raisins, almond extract.

Punch down dough and divide in two.

Roll each piece into 14-in x 10-in rectangle. Spread half poppy seed filling in each rectangle, avoiding edges.

Roll up on long side, pinching to seal dough and filling.

Place rolls on parchment lined baking sheet, seam side down.

Cover and let rise for 35-40 min.

Preheat oven to 350°.

Brush with oil and beaten egg.

Bake 35 min.

Cool and cut into 1/2-in slices.

BIRD

The tray of cake donuts sat on the prep table in the back of Revere Coffee. A bowl of pink glaze and a bowl of cleaned raspberries sat beside the tray, patiently looking up at the girl staring down at them.

Denise's gaze shifted between the tray of brown donuts and the bowls and angled her body toward the backdoor to catch coworkers walking in. She reached for a piping bag and a tip with heavy arms. Tense shoulders.

Tossing her braids over her shoulder, she scooped the glaze into the bag with a spatula, glancing at the backdoor, glancing out the window in front of her, glancing through the doorway at the entrance to the café.

Jacob called her Bird—because of her rapid eye movements. Like a hawk's shadow constantly falling over Denise, a tiny, frightened songbird. Like she was being hunted.

With tight hands, Denise piped the icing onto the donuts, taking slow breaths pretending Jacob was the piping bag and she was draining him of his blood.

Denise snorted. *A little too dark, but what did he know?*

The bell signaled a customer walking into the café. She whipped her head up but was too far back in the kitchen to see anything. Shivers shot through her body. She stood, silent, glaze dripping from the piping tip.

She *wasn't* being hunted.

Denise's stomach dropped at Selena's Doc Martens thudding toward her. Denise shivered again. "Hey, Denise, can you come help me? There's a ton of people out here."

Jacob wasn't here (thank God) but Selena was and that was just as bad.

"Yeah." Denise avoided her coworker's eyes, the only other Black employee at Revere.

Please don't be an idiot in front of her, Denny.

Denise set the piping bag on the prep table and waited until Selena had returned to her register before walking into the café. About a foot separated herself from Selena. She noticed Selena's perfume—roses. The whisper-thin gold band around Selena's pointer finger. The smear of whipped cream on her black short-sleeved shirt.

Building an imaginary wall between herself and her coworker, Denise took her customer's order—iced caramel macchiato and a gluten-free chocolate muffin—and turned to the coffee machine. And immediately collided with Selena. Denise's face warmed.

Selena touched Denise lightly on the arm and reached for a paper cup. "Sorry, Denise."

Denise's brain short-circuited. Her body was on autopilot steaming milk, mixing caramel, but her mind only focused on Selena's cold fingers brushing Denise's arm. Her customer's orders flew by in her haze of embarrassment and being too close to Selena.

For that 10 minutes, Denise forgot about Bird and her tense shoulders and shifting eyes.

But when she turned back to the counter after tossing a rejected receipt in the trash, Bird came back. Her breath flew out of her lungs. She gripped the countertop to hold herself steady.

The customer's hair was blond, the right shade—but the eyes. The eyes were wrong. They were brown, not blue. And behind Ray Bans.

"Are you alright?" The customer asked, glancing between Denise and Selena.

Denise blinked rapidly, forcing the memory to wash away. Selena watched her. *Deep breath.* "Yes. I'm sorry. What can I get for you?"

Once she had fumbled his order twice and spilled oat milk on the counter and dropped a stirring spoon on the floor, Denise returned to the donuts in the back. She stared down at her hands. Flexed them. Wiggled her fingers. Breathed. In. Out. In. Out.

I'm fine I'm fine I'm okay Everything is fine

She flexed her hands again. They tingled with feeling.

I'm here at work Not there I'm at work I'm here

No. Jacob didn't know anything about Bird. Didn't know how painful it was to call her Bird.

Gripping the lip of the prep table with her left hand, Denise reached for the bowl of raspberries with her right and placed a berry on each donut. Selena's rose perfume still swirled around her nose, barely distracting her from the blond hair in her memory.

Breathe. In, out, in, out.

A sharp, shrill sound scratched her ears—glass. She shot back in time to glass cracking and imploding inward, not at her, but at her daddy, at their living room couch where her daddy and she watched cartoons for three hours that day, and their shelf of blooming succulents. She was 11 years old, covering her head against glass shards, glass dust, reverberating through the house, through her little-kid bones. And the shouting, gun shots.

And here, in the back of Revere, she dropped the raspberry in her hand and crouched, throwing her arms over her head. She squeezed her eyes shut, letting her braids cover her face.

"Denise! Can you get the broom and dustpan?" Selena shouted, edge in her voice.

Selena had only broken a glass. Denise was okay. She was *okay*.

Staring at a black scuff mark on the red tile floor, she unclenched her hands from the side of her head and pushed breath deep into her stomach. Gripping the broom and dustpan tight enough to hide her shaking hands from Selena, Denise stepped around the shards of glass and

handed them to her coworker without saying anything, without even looking her in the eyes. Broken glass skittered along the floor as Selena swept the glass up, the clinks and chinks skittering up Denise's arms. Denise dragged her feet along the floor and, ignoring every customer who walked by, restocked the display case with the raspberry donuts.

Selena went on her break, leaving Bird alone.

Bird's hands didn't feel right—numb. Empty. Heavy.

Movement on the street caught her eye.

She froze.

No no no no no

Bird dropped to the floor and crawled away from the register, completely hidden by the display case. The bell over the door chimed, the sound too light, too pretty for the new customers.

No no please no

Their combat boots hit the floor and pounded toward the counter. With every step, the handcuffs attached to their belt jangled.

It had been months since she had seen any officers enter Revere. She pressed herself further against the cupboards under the display case, hoping to be invisible. She dropped her head in her hands.

If you can't see them, they can't see you.

Denise was 11 years old for the second time today.

Blue and red lights flashed through their tiny house in Polish Hill. Her daddy picked her up by her middle, ran her to her room, and shoved her inside her stuffy closet, fresh fear rocketing through her little body. She was still gripping her soup-covered spoon.

He brushed a small tear off her cheek, his face inches from hers, eyes wider than she had ever seen them. "Stay there, Denny."

Denise did, digging herself further into her clothes, pressed up against the closet walls as the cops burst through their front door, shot windows down, shot holes in the walls, shot their living room couch, shot their succulents. She squeezed her eyes shut so tightly, stars bloomed behind her eyes.

Her daddy screamed down the hall. His screams, his shouts covered her own, hiding her.

Unable to bear it any longer, Denise scrambled out of her closet, tears streaming down her face and opened her window. She tumbled out and landed in the manicured hedge bordering their small house. From behind bushes, she caught a glimpse of bright, blond hair throwing her daddy in their flashing car. The blond hair turned and, in the light of flashlights and red and blue lights, bright, almost alien-like, blue eyes shone.

That blond hair and those blue eyes stayed with her years later.

Denise had no mom or dad to help her, but her daddy's friend Ruta could.

As soon as the cops left, she sprang out from the bushes and ran as fast as she could to Ruta's house only two blocks away. Her feet flew along the twilight grass to Ruta, who let her in, no questions asked. And she stayed for 10 years.

They took her daddy because someone else had hidden drugs in their house. But her daddy couldn't prove it. And he had been locked away for 10 years. She hadn't seen him in all that time. He hadn't wanted her to visit—too dangerous. But she called every chance she could.

One of the officers rang the little bell on the counter. "Hello?"

Denise jolted back to 2008. Her back hurt from being pressed into the cabinet handles but she wouldn't move. Gunshots and glass were still too fresh in her mind.

The bell rang again. "Is anyone working?"

Denise kept her eyes squeezed shut.

The spring-loaded backdoor slammed. A figure stood in the doorway.

Selena.

She glanced between Denise and the officers with furrowed eyebrows. Denise's eyes grew wide. She shook her head. Selena's frown deepened.

"Ma'am," the officer's deep voice said. "We've been standing here for a while."

Selena blinked. "Of course. How can I help you?"

In a cloud of roses, Denise watched Selena flit between display case and coffee machine and register to keep herself from bursting out of her skin. Every now and then, Selena tossed her an odd look. Denise returned her gaze, silently thanking her.

Only once the officers had been sent away with coffee and pastry did Denise unpeel herself from the cabinet. Her black shirt stuck to her sweaty back. Selena's Doc Martens stood in her vision. She crouched down to meet Denise's eyes.

"Are you okay?"

Denise nodded. Then shook her head.

And burst into tears.

Selena grabbed a clean towel, sat next to Denise on the crumb—and-chocolate-sauce-stained floor, and pressed the towel into Denise's hands. Denise barely comprehended the graze of Selena's fingers against her own skin as she sobbed into the towel.

"What's going on? What's wrong with Bird?" *Jacob.*

Selena jerked her thumb toward the registers. "Finally, you're here. You're on."

Grumbling to himself and tossing them bewildered looks, Jacob tied a clean apron around his waist. He had to lean over Denise and Selena to grab pastries from the display.

They sat there—Denise and Selena—until Denise’s cries quieted and she was brought back to reality, sitting on the dirty floor of the café with Selena (*Selena*) next to her, their legs pressed against each other.

HERRON AVENUE

There was plenty of food in the freezer *and* the fridge but Ruta shoved the cooked pasta between the salad and fried kielbasa anyway, singing along to ABBA at the top of her lungs. A dishrag sat on the counter and Ruta grabbed it, wiping away food debris. A light breeze blew through her apartment, ruffling the deep blue fringe on her shirt.

Across from the fridge, a large calendar hung on the wall next to the telephone. Ruta stood in front of it, bracing her hand on the wall and swaying back and forth to the music. “Sue, Debbie, and Laura tonight. Becky and her son tomorrow.” She reached for a notepad and a pencil. “Check in on Todd too.”

Becky and her son, James, ate here last night. Ruta squeezed them in between Sue and three other guests. She raised her eyes to the dining table where only six place settings were available. During dinner, James had to sit in a red velvet desk chair Ruta got from Goodwill, and he complained the whole time about being too squished, but Ruta couldn’t blame him.

Tapping out a rhythm on her notepad with her pencil, she moved through her kitchen and checked every cupboard and drawer, compiling a grocery list as she went. No empty spaces. None.

Ruta pursed her lips and hummed. “Well...whatever. We’ll go anyway.”

This *was* a one-bedroom apartment. She’ll manage. Like she had for years.

She was in a high right now, but it was tricky to tell. Because every morning, with her coffee and omelet, she takes a white pill. It works a little too well, she believed.

A couple of years ago, with her mother’s help, she’d found a good doctor with a good reputation and good reviews. He’d given her a prescription—which didn’t work at all.

And another prescription—that sent her in lows constantly.

And now this one—the white pill on the counter.

And for the first time in decades, she had been able to breathe. And be at peace, even if it was a little. This pill still didn’t feel exactly right, but there was more balance than she’d ever had. Balance was difficult to manage. It made her head spin, learning what she and the world was like when she wasn’t in bed for weeks at a time or covered in a haze of manic energy.

With this balance, though, came her idea to cook meals for women without safety, women without money, women without the necessary skills to cook healthy food, women without the energy or motivation—the list could go on. Those women (and sometimes their kids) came to her apartment and left with full bellies and music in their ears.

Every woman was her, stuck in bed with a disappearing will to get up and find a meal. She knew what drowning was, she knew what sinking was. She knew these women, inside and out, even before their first meeting. It was nice for her too. She heard stories, made friends. For two hours, none of their issues mattered when there was good food, strong laughter, and music.

Ruta grabbed her purse, shoved the notepad and pencil into it, and headed out the door, letting ABBA spin on the record player.

When she got back home from Giant Eagle, she found Sue lounging on the low brick wall in front of Ruta's apartment building. Always exactly on time. Wordlessly, Sue took paper bags of food from Ruta's arms and followed Ruta inside her building.

"Who's coming tonight?" Sue asked from around the grocery bags.

"Well," Ruta began, digging in her purse for her keys. "You, Debbie, and Laura. Becky and James are tomorrow. You're welcome to join them if you want."

"What are you making tonight?"

Sue knew, but Ruta replied anyway, sliding the key in the lock and opening her door. "Pierogi."

Three hours later, the ABBA record played twice, and the kitchen had been cleaned, and Ruta whipped the door open to reveal Debbie and Laura in the best clothes they had. Laura held a cheap bottle of red. They swarmed through the open door, offering hugs to each other, renewed energy vibrating between the women. None of them could wait. Tuesdays were for pierogi. Not Mrs. T's but Ruta's, passed down for generations from Polish immigrants.

Ruta opened the bottle of wine, pouring each glass half full. "Ladies, I've been thinking—"

"Yeah? That's new." Debbie tossed a grin to Ruta over a forkful of pierogi and sauerkraut.

Ruta shot Debbie a withered look, hoping her hidden grin wouldn't give her away, and finished her sentence. "—of moving."

"Really?"

Ruta nodded, reaching for the serving dish of kapusta. "Not enough room. No counter space, no cupboard space."

"Sure," Sue replied, taking the dish from Ruta and heaping her plate full of the kielbasa. "It makes sense. You have more people to cook for."

"A bigger apartment would be nice," Laura agreed.

Stabbing her fork into a dumpling, Ruta said, "No, not an apartment." She chewed and swallowed. She was being dramatic, but who cares. If she was in a high she might as well be in a high. "I want a house."

Debbie propped her head up with her fist, pouring another glass of wine. "You're not thinking of getting married and having kids, are you?"

Ruta winced. "Lord, no." After that disaster with George, she was done. She had other people. Besides, she was a 42-year-old woman. Too late to marry, too mentally unstable. "I, um..." Ruta trailed off, realizing this is the first time she's said it out loud. To anyone. She took a

deep breath. “I want to open a house. For women at risk. I heard of the one in California and I think Pittsburgh could use one.”

Silence. Ruta bit her lip. And then—

“Oh, Ruta.” Sue grinned. “I love it.”

“Really?” Ruta looked around at the other women to see similar smiles on their faces. “I didn’t know if you’d think it was a good idea. You might have a farther distance to travel for dinners.”

“Don’t worry about us,” Debbie said, waving her hand around. “Do it anyway.”

Ruta twisted her lips. She *was* worrying about Debbie and Laura and Sue. They’re the ones she’d do this for. Them and their old, worn jeans and dropped-out kids and deadbeats of husbands. She’d move for them all. Even *if* she’d have to leave behind her red refrigerator.

“Right. We can help if you want, of course.” Laura reached across and tapped the table with her pointer finger, bringing Ruta back to their conversation.

Ruta nodded. “You’ll be the people I go to for help.”

“After Anna, I’m sure.” Sue winked.

Ruta laughed. “Of course.”

Ruta stood in front of a red-brick house in Shadyside with Sue and her mother.

“Well, that was a waste of time.” Anna’s dry, wrinkled hand swung her pink Chanel purse toward the house’s door and flipped off the realtor’s car rounding the corner with her other hand. Ruta smacked her mom’s offending hand out of the air.

“Not really.” Ruta said, rolling her eyes and crossing off the house from the list she made in her notepad. “One down, at least.”

The house was advertised as recently renovated in a newspaper Laura gave her, but once they stepped inside it was evident from the wood paneled walls and checked curtains, the last time this house was renovated was in 1962. Anna asked the realtor about this and she said she had “no idea” what they were talking about. But when Ruta produced the newspaper and evidence of the renovation statement, the realtor floundered. They left shortly after that.

Turning away from the brick house, Ruta unlocked her Toyota and got into the driver’s seat. “We have one in Upper Hill and the last one in—” Ruta double-checked her list. “Polish Hill.”

Her mother took Ruta’s list and bag out of her way, saying, “Hopefully one of these last two are better than that horrible paneling. I can’t believe that was in style.”

Ruta furrowed her eyebrows and glanced in the rearview mirror at Sue sitting in the backseat. They shared a smile. “Mom, don’t you have wood paneling in the living room?”

Anna huffed. “Yes, but I’d like to have it redone. It’s 1990; far too late.”

Ruta grinned, turning onto Fifth Avenue.

The two-story on Anaheim Street stuck out like a sore thumb against the clean, sharp lines of new houses. Ruta winced at the crumbling siding. The dying flowers.

Sue reached for the newspaper. “This isn’t what the picture looks like. You’d think they’d clean this up a little before selling it,” she mumbled from the back.

A loud sigh from the passenger seat. “I wish you’d let your father and I help with the financials. You could get something really nice.”

“Mom,” Ruta responded, this repeated conversation already draining her. She pulled herself out of her car. “I told you; you don’t have to do that. I don’t want to seem pretentious.”

“Since you didn’t give me grandchildren to spoil, I have to do *something* for you,” Anna said over the top of the car, swinging her purse again.

“We’ll talk about it, Mom.”

All three strode to the door where the realtor stood. But this house wasn’t any good either. Enough room, several bedrooms, only one bathroom. Shit for a house of women.

After the tour, they swung into the Toyota, exhausted and disappointed. “One more,” Ruta assured her mother and best friend.

Overlooking the Allegheny River, Polish Hill was tucked away, hidden behind trees and hills and bushes and sunflowers, built from the ground up by working class Polish immigrants in the 1800s. If Ruta was superstitious, she would’ve taken the cultural history as a good sign. But the green-painted house had to sell her first.

Families walked along the street, ice cream in hand. Anna gave the neighborhood an appreciative nod. “So far so good.”

Their realtor took them through the decently sized, lush front lawn. Wildflowers ran along the porch. Paint was peeling off the walls, but there was no wood paneling. They walked down the hall to the kitchen, down the hall to the spacious living room, down another hall to the backyard. The sweet smell of fresh pasta sauce would float through the rooms. Flowers and a vegetable garden would grow in the backyard. Women would huddle together in the living room, safe from stress and expectations, assumptions and sharp eyes.

At the end of the tour, after looking in each of the six tiny bedrooms, all three women sat in the Toyota, almost breathless, a stronger sense of hope reverberating through the car.

Sue leaned forward, a small smile on her lips. “So?”

Ruta walked through the house in her mind. “The bedrooms are smaller than I would like and the entire house needs fresh paint.”

“But?”

Ruta's smile grew, tossing out the horrible houses from before. "I think this could be it."

The car erupted in whoops and hollers. Ruta's joy spread between her best friends. Laughter rocked the Toyota, glances cast at the house that was as good as sold, the house on Herron Avenue.

"What's next for you then?" Sue asked, her grin covering her entire face.

Ruta looked out at the house with the red shutters, flowers covering the lattice of the porch. "I need board members, a license, and 501(c)3 status."

"Simple."

"Any ideas for the board members?" Anna asked.

By the gleam in her eye, she was hinting at something. Ruta knew. Had been planning for it. "Well, you two." They stared back at her, eyes wide. "If you'd like. We'd all need to be trained, of course, and it'll be a lot of work, but I'd love to have you both."

Anna and Sue beamed. They said nothing, but the drive home, the music playing, the overwhelming joy was answer enough for her, as the three of them formed the house into a shelter, a sanctuary against the rough of life.

POLISH HILL

Nellie had been evicted. Her money and her landlord's patience had run out. Now, she walked.

In her hand was her phone with a sticky note stuck to the screen, around her shoulders was a small backpack filled with all she had time to pack (the rest would be held in storage until she found a new place), and in her arms was Michelle. An address and a name written with black ink on the sticky note gave her direction:

3200 Herron Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15219
Ruta Laksa

The lit phone screen showed her the way. Nellie gripped a sleeping Michelle to her chest as she walked down Webster Avenue in the fading evening light. Headlights streamed past.

Nellie heard of the Sanctuary from a friend of a friend—out of necessity.

Michelle cooed, sticking out her little pink tongue. Nellie grinned. “Rise and shine, little girl.”

She picked up her pace, the backpack slamming against her back. Michelle would be hungry soon and Nellie wasn't keen on feeding Michelle in the street, where prying eyes and drugged minds walked freely. She prayed the lady running the Sanctuary would have room for her—she wasn't keen on walking around all night either.

With time, she made it to Lincoln Highway. She crossed, shielding Michelle's eyes from the glare of headlights and the roar of car engines. Michelle was the only thing moving Nellie's feet forward.

She entered Polish Hill. And a hill it was.

As she trudged around Polish Hill and its number of hills, with her thin shirt sticking to her back, she caught glances of bakeries, restaurants, a church perched on top of a hill. Her chest tightened.

How long would I be able to stay?

Her footfalls slowed as she came to a two-story with red shutters. Lights lit from inside. 3200 Herron Avenue. With Michelle pressed close to her chest, her tiny fists smacking against Nellie's side, Nellie took wavering steps up to the door. Hoping. Praying.

And rang the doorbell.

Please please please

The door swung open. A tiny woman—Ruta Laksa, she assumed—stood in the doorway. Her graying brown hair brushed her shoulders. Nellie opened her mouth to introduce herself but

before she could get any words out, Ruta said, "Come in, I was just about to put dinner away." Ruta held the door wide, as if Nellie was her daughter, just visiting for the evening.

But Nellie didn't enter the home. What does this woman think, seeing a teenaged, sweaty Black woman holding a baby to her chest? Nellie glanced down at Michelle against her chest. Ruta followed her gaze. "Dear?"

Nellie shook her head, too worried about Michelle sleeping on the street that night to hesitate any longer. She stepped through into a small foyer. Laughter and voices drifted in from a room in the house. "I'm sorry to intrude. I hope you have room for us."

"Of course. If you'd like to take your bag off, I can hold your child," Ruta said, closing the door and holding her hands out in front of her.

Nellie jerked Michelle out of Ruta's reach. Her fingertips turned white from gripping Michelle. "No. Thank you."

Ruta nodded, asked no questions, and stood in silence at Nellie's urgent behavior. She watched as Nellie took off one backpack strap, switched Michelle to the other arm, then took off the second strap, letting it dangle on her elbow. Ruta reached for the backpack and Nellie let her.

"I don't ask any questions unless you're ready." Ruta said. "If you're comfortable with it, I can introduce you to my other girls and one little boy while I fix you dinner."

At the empty pit in her stomach from a slice of toast for lunch, Nellie nodded and followed Ruta to the brightly lit kitchen. As Nellie walked in, the group at the table looked up. Nellie caught the eye of another Black girl, a few years younger than her. She gave Nellie a smile.

After introducing herself to the group, Nellie learned the names of Heather and Wyatt (two new members), Sue (Ruta's friend and board member), Kathy and Clara (who had been here for a few weeks), and Denise (the Black girl who had lived here before but recently found an apartment).

"Have a seat. I'll fill a plate for you," Ruta said, pulling out a chair.

In an unbelieving daze, Nellie sat, still holding Michelle as if their lives depended on it. And maybe they did. But as Ruta filled a plate with kielbasa and pierogi, and as the women and one little boy shared jokes and stories, and as Nellie slowly unrolled herself, she made glances at her daughter who had fallen asleep again with her puffy cheek resting against Nellie's chest. Stealing food off her own plate, Nellie only listened to the easy conversation flowing around the table.

When was the last time she had been part of a group like this? Bigger than Michelle and herself? Whatever happened to them, wherever they'd live after this, a steady stream of safety drifted into Nellie.

For now, the Sanctuary in Polish Hill was her reprieve from the roughness of the streets and the moment she had been kicked out of her apartment. For this night and the next day and maybe a few more after that, she was content with this space she'd found out of her desperation, almost like magic.

Kapusta

28 oz. sauerkraut

2 lbs. kielbasa, not smoked

28 oz. marinara

Strain sauerkraut and rinse for 2-3 min.

Brown kielbasa over med. heat in lg. pot.

Add sauerkraut and marinara, reduce to low heat.

Slow simmer and cover. Leave for 1 hour, stirring occasionally.

Slice kielbasa before serving.

RUTA'S GIRLS

When Ruta plopped peeled potatoes in a pot of boiling water only a few hours ago, she didn't consider needing to add an extra place setting at the dining table.

But when a young Black woman with a baby to her chest stood on the Sanctuary's porch, hesitating before walking in, Ruta's mind was pulled into overdrive.

Another plate, cup, baby formula, probably, toothbrush, toothpaste, diapers, PJs.

After almost a decade of taking women into the Sanctuary, this list had burrowed itself in her mind like a mantra. Repeated every time a woman knocked on her door, out of breath, with frantic eyes. These women left their homes on impulses, out of desperation. They didn't have time to pack everything they think they'd need. There was plenty of room for this new daughter—Nellie—and her baby. Plenty of food, of laughter, of stories.

Ruta watched her now, as she handed Nellie a second helping of pierogi and kielbasa. Nellie protested against a second plate, but as she reluctantly took the full plate anyway, Ruta caught relief, gratefulness, a shining in her eyes. And considering the sharp collar bones poking out from Nellie's shirt, Ruta wouldn't have let Nellie go without enough food.

A mother she is.

And food was her medicine.

Nellie gave her sleeping daughter constant glances as if she was checking to make sure she was still in her arms. She gave looks around the room, as if she couldn't believe she was here and not on the streets. And Ruta received glances herself, as if she was Nellie's savior.

I suppose I am. If a savior opens the door.

But it still made Ruta sick to think this—that she could be the savior of her daughters, the savior from the lives that kept them up at night, that closed them off from reaching out.

Her eyes flicked from daughter to daughter.

Heather: the corners of her mouth lifted as she brushed Wyatt's blond curls off his forehead. He shoveled kielbasa into his kapusta-stained mouth.

Sue: she waved her hands around in the air, reciting a story she's told a dozen times, sitting to Ruta's immediate left. Always there.

Kathy and Clara: with flowers from the backyard in their hair and red wine in their glasses.

Denise: she rested her chin in the palm of her hand, eyes fixed on Sue and her story, her smile the widest of them all.

And Nellie: taking bigger bites of pierogi, casting frequent glances to the baby resting in her arms. Her shoulders dropped. Barely.

Ruta's heart tightened in her chest so strongly she could hardly breathe. Almost 20 years since she built this shelter, this home, the Sanctuary. Never had she imagined the total and complete wholeness she'd receive from her girls—Ruta's girls.

Ruta stood with watering eyes and walked to the fridge. With her back facing her girls, she dug around the Tupperware containers, wiping her eyes with the neckline of her shirt. Throughout the years, scrapes of fork on plate, sips of wine, laughter had kept her feet planted on the ground. Throughout the years, relaxing shoulders and growing smiles and breaths of relief from her girls kept the door open. Every time Ruta opened the door to find a terrified, weary woman staring back at her, she let her in. Ruta knew what it was like to drown.

All for them. The peeling yellow paint, the clock, the vegetable garden, the food in the fridge were all for her girls—Ruta's girls.

With a smile and dried eyes, Ruta pulled a Tupperware container out of the fridge and straightened. At the head of the table, she raised the container and asked, "Who wants pączki?"

And grinned as her girls—and son—shot their hands in the air.