

## The Émigrés

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The two little girls ran across the grass, fleet as wind. They played together on the back lawn, drifting across the roots of trees, until the older girl spied Holly next door on her mother's deck, taking down the laundry. The younger girl stared boldly up at Holly, then fled with her sister behind the heavy blue flowers of a hydrangea bush. Holly worked a wooden clothespin from the line that traveled along a pulley above her mother's lawn, releasing a billowing sheet. She pulled the line in, hand over hand, and dropped the pieces of laundry into a wicker basket. A red cardinal burst into her field of vision, sudden and swift, flying straight above the line of rope, and landed, now only a rustle of green needles, in the far branches of a fir tree.

The girls' grandmother opened the basement door onto a small patio under the deck of the house. She closed the door behind her and walked the yard, as if fixing its perimeters. It was enclosed by a chain-link fence with the exception of the driveway the family shared with Holly's mother, and even then she had had to convince the girls' grandfather of the impossibility of opening her car door should the fence be extended there. The girls' grandfather had begun the project of attaching green fabric to the inside of the fence; it was already in place at the other side of the yard and at the border of the property behind the house. Soon the yard would be barricaded by sight as well.

The girls ran to their grandmother and stood before her. She smoothed their hair and put her broad hand on their small backs and surrendered them to their play. She walked across the yard, from fence line to fence line, as if on a kind of watch. Holly waited for her to look up. She waved. The girls' grandmother waved back, at first automatically, then, having remembered

Holly, with warmth. She walked up the stairs to the deck and went inside the house, back into the enclosed world the family inhabited.

Holly left the laundry basket inside the kitchen door and returned the old canvas clothespin holder to its place on the floor next to the refrigerator. Her mother Nora sat at the table over a cup of coffee, smoking a cigarette. It was one of the few indulgences of her entire life, and she persisted in smoking after almost everyone had stopped and there was nowhere left to smoke in public. She bought cigarettes by the carton and smoked three or four a day, one after each meal and sometimes one before she went to bed. Smoking made her still, almost dreamy; otherwise, when Holly and her husband Dean visited, she was quick, almost abrupt in her movements, and in her vigilant attentions to her house there was always some chore for one of them to do.

“I saw the cardinal again,” Holly said.

Her mother blew a trail of smoke into the small kitchen. Smoking had somewhat criminalized her, and so she consigned herself there. She looked at her daughter and smiled. “He’s a beautiful cardinal,” her mother said. She inhaled another lungful of smoke. Nora had gray eyes and hair rinsed light brown, set in short curls around her forehead and temples. She wore a pair of denim slacks and a cotton shirt. Even when she smoked there was a certain antique glamor about her, as if she brought with her cigarette case and lighter, placed near her elbow on the old kitchen table, memories of night clubs and swing bands.

Holly carried the laundry basket into the house and folded the items it contained in her mother’s bedroom. Her mother liked to do laundry on sunny days so she could hang it on the line to dry. She liked the smell of the sun on her towels and sheets. Holly put away the laundry in its assigned drawers and closets and left a few things for her mother to help her with later. She

brought the basket to the basement, then poured herself a second cup of coffee and sat at the table with her mother.

Dean was upstairs, raising storm windows and pulling down the screens. Nora had given him the task of making the house ready for the new season. He had already changed the order of the storm windows downstairs and replaced the storm panels on the front and back doors with screens. All the doors and windows were open. The air moved through the house. It smelled clean, like earth and new leaves. The house was almost the last on a street that had once been woodland, and there were still a lot of the old trees in the yards, large firs and oaks. They towered over the houses, a mixture of Cape Cods, two-family homes, and small, shoebox-shaped bungalows. All of the houses were worn and blemished by age and requiring repair: paint on the front steps, a new window frame, a repointing of brick. Over the years, in defiance of the tragedies of want and need, Holly's mother had planted her yard with daffodils and tulips, climbing clematis, forsythia bushes, and decorative cedars, and it looked verdant and welcoming, a surprising map of color on the declining street.

Nora stood and said, "I think I'll go read my book while you and Dean take care of things." She had crushed out her cigarette and placed her cigarette case on top of the ashtray.

"What are you reading?" Holly said. She was following her mother into the living room.

"Oh that war memoir by that French woman," Nora said. "She found her diaries abandoned in a cupboard. She doesn't remember a thing about writing them." Nora borrowed the books from the public library and read entirely from the nonfiction section. By now she could speak with some authority on the subject of the war years and the Cold War decades that followed. Sometimes, over the telephone, she related to Holly an incident from one of the books. There was always some unexpected element of human motive in them, men and women in crisis

within a larger disruption, a larger crisis. But mostly she merely closed the covers and returned the books to the library, the only witness to her lengthy hours of reading a typed list of the books and the dates she had read them. She smoothed her denim slacks and picked up her book from the ottoman. She sat in a green plush chair and began to read under the light of the picture window.

Holly went upstairs. Dean had finished adjusting the screens and was sitting on one of the twin beds in the guest bedroom, trying to type on his laptop.

“I tried working in the other room,” Dean said in a low voice, “but my legs began to go to sleep. At least I got the Internet up. There must be an open connection somewhere in the neighborhood.”

The other room, directly across the landing, was an unfinished space that Nora used as an attic. In it were a few old chests of drawers, a trunk, a bookcase containing a dictionary and books on gardening, and plastic dress bags where Nora stored her out-of-season clothes. There was a small window across the room set in an unpainted frame. Strips of pink insulation hung between the beams along the roofline. To work, as Dean wanted to, there was nowhere to sit but the floor. “I’ll talk to my mother about a table and a chair,” Holly said. “Maybe there’s something stored away.” But she knew before she finished her thought that there was nothing stored away and that her mother would resist any request to remove a piece of furniture to the upstairs, to change the order of her house.

Holly turned the wedding band on her finger. She had good, sharp, deeply set brown eyes. She looked at Dean with a kind of habitual patience, as if she always observed the world, and him in it, from slightly afar. He closed the laptop and put it on the floor. He took Holly’s

hand and led her to the bed. They sat close together on the chenille bedspread. The old springs gave, making a sound of protest.

Dean held her. His body was big and sturdy. He had a luxurious mat of hair on his chest. A tuft of it showed above the neckline of his sports shirt. When they were alone, when he held her in their own bed, his chest hair on her skin was like fur.

“The windows held up another year?” Holly whispered. She often felt, here, as if she had come to a place where there was penance to undergo. As if she could only know her husband again after a number of labors.

“Yes ma’am,” Dean said. His hand was at her waist; along the curve of her hip.

Holly turned and lay on her back. This was the room where she slept when she visited her mother, before she married Dean. The house had felt cloistered, immaculate; the habitation of women. Holly played gin rummy with her mother and Scrabble on an old board, stained with coffee rings, the wooden tiles worn to a patina. They both smoked cigarettes then. They breathed thin gray curls of smoke into the kitchen, and to Holly each exhale was like a sigh. Her mother had the cleaning woman in before Holly’s visits, and she served their meals punctually over the space of the day and went to bed at 10, after the local news. Holly felt imprisoned in her mother’s world of ritual and routine. But she had begun to understand, in the way her mother insisted on maintaining it over the years, on the most ordinary days, that it had saved her from something she didn’t want to think or talk about, and that it would be impossible now to let go.

Dean brushed Holly’s hair away from her face and began to kiss her. The bedsprings complained. He kissed her goodbye in the morning. He kissed her in airport terminals and after services at church and when they walked along the marshlands where the Asian water lilies grew. He kissed her after dinner. They had been married three years. They had each brought a

certain sorrow, a certain deep consideration, a certain gladness to their marriage, because they had lost quite a lot beforehand. Other wives and husbands. It seems they had lost a great deal of people. They were aware of all the losses that inevitably come to one. Each year on their anniversary they stood under a flowering willow on a roadside near their apartment building and married each other all over again.

Nora was downstairs, opening cabinet doors, opening the refrigerator. Things were being taken down, taken out. Holly sat up and pressed her chest against Dean and kissed him goodbye. The twin bed was low to the floor and he took her hand and helped her up. The other twin bed, where she slept, was higher, with a new mattress so thick that the protector wouldn't hold; after a night of sleep Holly's cheek on waking was against the bare mattress, the protector all pulled away. At night she felt at an unbearable distance from her husband as she lay in the darkness in the uncomfortable bed, listening to his breathing.

Nora moved around the kitchen. She handed Holly plates and dishes to bring to the dining room table. She said "Sit, sit," to Dean and he sat in one of the chairs while the women laid the food before him. Nora had prepared a fruit salad, a lime Jell-O salad with cream cheese and grated carrot, and a plate of wheat bread and thinly sliced, rare roast beef. There was another plate of lettuce and sliced tomato. Nora had spooned mustard and mayonnaise into separate glass dishes. Lemon slices and cubes of ice revolved slowly in a pitcher of tea. The evening before, Holly and Dean had arrived late, at dinnertime, for Mother's Day weekend, with Friday afternoon traffic stalled ahead of them and on the northbound side of the throughway as well, and they met more traffic as they turned off the throughway onto North Main Street. They breathlessly sat down to a dinner Nora had prepared of roast lamb, crispy potatoes, and snap peas.

“Can I make you a sandwich?” Holly said to her mother. Dean had passed her the serving plate.

“No, no,” Nora said. She took two slices of roast beef and tapped a spoonful of mustard onto her plate.

“This is very good roast beef,” Dean said. He had built himself a towering sandwich. He was calm and polite with Holly’s mother. Nora thought Dean a steady, good man, but Holly thought Dean hadn’t been able to learn how to relax completely with her, and to be with her as a member of the family. She thought he was still trying to learn how to do that, or perhaps he had moved up to the border and decided to stay there.

“Do you remember your neighbor’s name?” Holly said to her mother. “The grandmother next door, the grandmother of those little girls. I saw her when I was taking in the laundry.”

“Something, something like Madeline or Marjorie,” Nora said. “I wish I could understand her better. It would be good to have a neighbor to talk to. Though the girls are very sweet. So shy when they first moved here. But now when I get out of the car they come over and ask for hugs.”

“Mirjeta,” Holly said, with the finality of memory. “She told me when I went over to meet her, in the yard, before the fence went up. It must have been at least a year ago.”

“Oh that fence,” Nora said. “Well the father is gone, did I tell you? He apparently wasn’t ambitious enough for the girls’ mother, so she sent him along. Now the grandparents come to the house while the mother is away at work. She has a very good job in a nursing home. The father used to take good care of those girls, in my opinion, but he was sent away nonetheless.” Nora’s eyebrows had knitted together in consternation.

“I remember him,” Holly said. “I remember seeing him, that is. But hadn’t they just come here, weren’t they new?” How does one begin, she thought. How does one begin in all of one’s newness.

“Oh, he was very nice,” Nora said. “He did all of that beautiful stone work in the yard-- the patio and the walkway in the front. He and his wife’s father replaced my gutters. The needles from the fir tree overwhelm the gutters so I asked them if they could possibly take a look.”

Dean sent Holly a signal, a brief shift of his eyes. He flexed his shoulders minutely.

“Between the two of them,” Nora continued, “they hardly spoke a word of English. We didn’t have a language in common to discuss the matter. The grandfather showed me a receipt from the hardware store and I covered it and paid them what I thought was fair for their labor.” She served the fruit salad in little lotus-shaped cups and offered them to Holly and Dean. “He didn’t argue,” she said, “so I guess my estimate was correct.”

“If I may ask,” Holly, said, “what did you pay them?”

“Why, twenty dollars,” Nora said.

Holly felt her lungs deflate, discouraged for the men who had done this work for her mother and who were too kind or new to counter her.

Nora passed a serving dish to Dean and he positioned a circle of Jell-O salad on his plate with a serving spoon Nora had taken from her mother’s silverware chest. Nora’s dining room was arranged with the oak furniture she had inherited from her mother and father: the table and chairs, a sideboard, and a china cabinet with a door of curved and beveled glass. Holly remembered the furniture in her grandparents’ dining room. She had loved to sit at the table with her grandparents, who seemed so old to her, and at peace together.

Nora's bedroom contained an oak four-poster bed that had belonged to her parents, and a matching vanity table and chest of drawers. Elsewhere in the house she had a Hitchcock desk and chair, a set of matching side-table lamps, and a spindle-legged table on which in recent years to mark the Christmas season she placed a miniature evergreen of bristling plastic branches. She seemed to exist in a kind of Yankee obliviousness, full of manners and a certain brisk grace, while living in a small Cape Cod house at the end of a neglected city street that seemed to Holly as if it could be stormed at any moment by whomever desired to. Years ago she had advised her mother to get deadbolt locks for the doors, and on her next visit the doors held small brass sliding-bolt locks, which were more the idea of a lock than a lock, and which Nora most of the time forgot to engage.

All her early life Holly had lived with her mother in one shambling house after the next. In her childhood her mother rented an old house with a yard occupied by crab grass and small thorny bushes. Each room was accessed by a fieldstone step and built at an obtuse angle so no one room seemed to have any relationship to the other. The house always held a chill. Holly was too young to question whether it was from thrift or lack of funds. Even in summer the house was cold, like the impenetrable cold of stone. Her mother then rented the top floor of another old house with sloping ceilings and a staircase that led from the downstairs front hall to a narrow pit, an architectural error, it seemed to Holly, from which one stepped up into the living room or into the hallway that led to the bedrooms. Holly had to stoop under the roofline when setting the kitchen table. Nora parked her car in the barn. Its entrance had a high threshold over which she would gun the car, and Holly, her palms pressed to the dashboard, waited for the lift of the car, its sudden drop, and the urgent pump of the brakes. After both of her parents had died Nora took her inheritance and bought the small Cape Cod house and moved her parents' furniture into it.

The rental houses were isolated, separated from their neighbors it seemed now to Holly more by circumstance than actual geography, and the house Nora had finally been able to own seemed to exist in that same isolation. One morning a number of decades ago Nora's husband, Holly's father, packed a suitcase, boarded a flight out of Bradley to O'Hare to catch a connection to Oklahoma City--where Nora knew even as she closed his suitcase she would never go--having arranged, he said, to spend the week pursuing job leads, and never returned. It had been years since Nora had spoken his name. But all of the places she lived, that were somehow inadequate, somehow wanting, seemed like a rebuke to Holly's father, who had escaped the expectations of the East and of his wife and child that had all somehow confounded him, and had left Nora alone.

Nora topped Dean's glass of iced tea. "Did you notice the fence in the yard on the other side of the house?" she said to Holly. "The neighbors over there?"

"The white one," Holly said, trying to remember what had been there. "It looks new."

"They took down the swimming pool. They left all the parts leaning against the inside of the fence."

"Who lives there now?" Holly said, though she barely remembered who had lived there before.

"I don't know their names," Nora said. "The trees block the view of the house. Maybe that's for the best. I just hear cars coming and going in and out of the driveway."

An older couple, from Jamaica, had lived across the street, but they had moved away. Nora had liked them. She enlisted them to take in her mail when she went to visit far-away friends. Another couple, a barrel-chested man and a woman who often sat in a lawn chair drinking Cokes, had lived directly across the street. A magnificent cherry tree grew high above

the house, which the new owners had had chopped down. Holly remembered how each season, over the course of days, its dense pink pedals fell in drifting showers onto the lawn and the street. Somewhere lived a teenage boy, not completely right in the head, according to Nora, who shoveled the snow from her driveway during the worst months of the winter. She used to speak in passing about another family with a number of children, all very polite, she observed to Holly, but Holly didn't know what house they lived in or even if they lived on the street anymore. No one ever appeared to be about but the little girls next door. The street seemed to be inhabited by immigrants, passing upward, passing through, leaving the street in another stage of exhaustion with each retreat.

Nora and Holly cleared the table and Holly washed the dishes. Dean, unsure of what else to do, went upstairs to his computer. At home Holly got everything ready and Dean cooked dinner and afterward they cleared the table and he talked with her while she washed the dishes. It was a good arrangement, but when Nora inquired about her daughter's menus and meal preparation she put forth the opinion that Holly was neglecting Dean and her role as Dean's wife. Holly was happy to be getting something right. She had been married before, two times in her twenties, and how does one know anything then? How to measure distances, how to read the signs, how to travel a curved line. Then, after what had felt like permanent winter, a place of cold and dark, she had met Dean. During her twice-monthly telephone calls to her mother, her mother often said, "Oh Holly, Dean is a fine man, I know, but how I wish for the days when we used to sit at the kitchen table smoking cigarettes and playing gin rummy." She gave Holly recipes for spinach omelets and stuffed mushrooms.

Holly went to the car to get her old clothes. The little girls were in the front yard with their grandmother. The older girl was twirling on the stone walk her father had built, stepping

one foot in front of the other. Her long brown hair lofted above her shoulders and seemed to weave in the air, following the turn of the girl's body. She looked up at Holly and stopped, her pink Crocs still, her hair falling and resting again on her shoulders, and slipped away, into the house. The younger girl climbed onto her bicycle and rode it in circles, showing off for Holly. Holly saw the grandfather lift a bag of loam on the other side of the yard and shake it onto the ground. The grandmother, Mirjeta, walked toward Holly. Holly took her hand.

“Do you remember me from last time, when we met, I think it was last spring,” Holly said, and she repeated her name to her.

“Yes,” Mirjeta said. “Spring.” Then she said, “How are you?” The younger girl had jumped off her bike and stood next to her grandmother, boldly looking at Holly.

“I'm here with my husband for the weekend,” Holly said. “We're going to plant flowers for my mother. Hello,” she said to the little girl. The girl continued to stare at Holly. She thrust her little chest out.

“This is Elira,” Mirjeta said. “She is four. Would you like some coffee?” The older girl studied Holly from the crack between the screen door and its frame. The front yard had been converted to a garden. The grass was turned under and the soil covered with loam. Small pale green shoots stood in ordered rows in the furrowed ground. The garden took up the entire front yard, stopping just short of the stone walk.

“Kaltrina,” Mirjeta said. “Come here. This is Holly. Kaltrina is five.”

Kaltrina opened the door and took a step onto the walkway.

A white car drove up the street, made a U-turn where the street dead-ended, and parked in front of the girls' house. Willie Colon's trombone thundered through the open widows and abruptly stopped when the driver cut the engine. A young woman got out of the passenger side

and followed the driver, a young man, to a one-story white house across the street. She crushed out her cigarette on the street with her boot heel and threw a contemptuous look at Mirjeta. Both wore baggy cargo pants sliding down their hips and black sleeveless T-shirts. Their upper arms were decorated with tattoos. They sat together on the front steps of the house. The young man lit a cigarette for himself and one for the young woman. The girl's dark hair hung in thick strands over her shoulders; the boy's was closely shaved. They looked like guardians of something alien and forbidding, sitting silent and unmoving at the door to the house.

"Come," Mirjeta said, and Holly followed Mirjeta and her granddaughters into the house. The living room was modest, like Holly's mother's, with a leather couch, a fireplace, a clock on the wall in the shape of a sun, two easy chairs, and a coffee table that held a number of children's toys. It was probably the girls' parents' idea of an American house, Holly surmised, everything new, clean, without a history. The girls spoke the language of children, soft whispers and little shrieks. Sometimes they spoke the language of their parents and grandparents, words with different intonations within the hesitant English. Kaltrina, more daring now in her own house, sat next to Holly on the couch. Elira stood in front of Holly, swelling her little chest. "I cut my hair," she announced. "She cut her hair with the scissors," Kaltrina explained. Elira pulled her short dark brown hair up and turned her head to show Holly what she had done. "Mama had to take her to fix it," Kaltrina said.

"Oh," Holly said, "you cut your hair! Well it looks very pretty." Of course she had cut her hair, Holly thought. You come to a new country or you are born to a new country and you wear your hair like a guerrilla. You are at war with your own history. You are perhaps at war with a country you don't understand. You can be four and know this.

Mirjeta brought a cup of coffee on a wooden tray and set it on the coffee table as she moved the children's toys out of the way. There were books on Cinderella and Pinocchio and bright pieces of paper that had been pasted onto felt and little magical looking balls made of clear plastic with sparkles suspended in them.

"Do you take cream?" Mirjeta said. Her English was slow and labored.

"No, thank you," Holly said. "The coffee is delicious. You aren't having any?"

"My English," Mirjeta said. "It is not good." She had an accent that sounded to Holly's ears as if from Eastern Europe, the words clear, with a throaty sound under each one.

"My mother will be home in four minutes," Kaltrina announced to Holly. She had begun to spread the toys out on the coffee table for Holly. Elira took some more from the end table next to the couch.

Mirjeta's face was calm and beautiful, but it held an old sadness. Her skin, a dark golden color, looked as if she had spent time in the sun, while her granddaughters' eyes were full of hunger for the day, for the strange woman sitting in their living room, and their skin was pale and clear. Mirjeta held her chin up slightly, as if that would help her in her search for English words. "My daughter speak English," she said to Holly. "I learn it from her."

"My mother loves your grandchildren," Holly said. She could only speak English to the girls' grandmother, so she went on. She said, "They give her hugs when she comes home in her car."

"My English not too good," Mirjeta said. "Kaltrina translates for me."

But Kaltrina was five and she stood quietly at the mention of her name, as if hoping not to be called upon.

"You have children?" Mirjeta said.

“No,” Holly said. “I have a husband. Dean.”

“We have four children,” Mirjeta said. “Three here.” Mirjeta lifted her palm and Holly thought she meant somewhere nearby. “We live a few streets over there. My other son, won’t fight, go to Switzerland.”

“Won’t fight?” Holly said.

“He not fight. Terrible war. Make no sense. One day no more Yugoslavia. We from Kosovo. Now no more Kosovo.”

“Do you know people here?” Holly said.

“No,” Mirjeta said. “No one care to. Close doors, stay inside. No one to visit.”

“Have others come?” Holly said. She mean to say, Do you have friends here from home, do you help each other, does it make it easier for you, do you cook the old foods, do you laugh again? but Holly was silent, suddenly confounded by her own language.

“The Roma come,” Mirjeta said. “But the Roma bad.”

The girls had run upstairs and then upstairs again and come down with a small plastic table and two chairs. They were showing Holly all of their things in the living room, and now some of their things from upstairs. They sat at the table to show Holly what it was all about.

Mirjeta’s husband opened the front door and stepped into the room, tucking a cotton bandana into his back pocket. He extended his hand to Holly. “Leka,” he said, and bowed, and Holly stood and gave her name and shook his hand. His skin was tanned and his forehead was deeply lined. He had graying, dark blond hair. His bones were angled and agile, as if he were used to satisfying work with his body. He had a pleasant face. He sat in one of the easy chairs and spread his fingers over his knees and scowled. “I tell those kids to leave,” he said. He looked

at Holly but he was speaking mostly to his wife. “They sit in their car and play their music, I tell them park at their own house.”

Mirjeta said something to her husband in their language. Holly put a thumbnail to her tooth. The young man and woman had disturbed her. They had seemed so hostile, so offended that she and Mirjeta would even dare to regard them, and so removed from any loyalties but to each other.

“I see your husband outside,” Leka said. “You planting some flowers, eh? He would like a coffee?”

Holly got up and called to Dean, who was standing on the grass, trowel in hand, surveying a small tract of dirt under the lamppost. He put down the trowel. The men shook hands and sat across from each other drinking Turkish coffee from elaborately painted porcelain cups that Mirjeta had presented on the same wooden tray. The girls sat on either side of Holly, pressing for her attention. Dean sat ceremonially with his host, bringing the cup to his lips and taking small sips of the coffee. Leka had taken an attitude of comradeship with Dean. He was talking to him about Clinton and the Dayton Accords. He said “Clin-tun” and “Day-tun,” as if they were the same. “End of war,” he said, “but not of troubles.” He lifted his chin upward too, trying to find the English words with which to speak with Dean. Dean listened respectfully, his body canted toward his host.

Kaltrina, shy again with Dean in the house, began to fidget with her dress.

“Dean and I were going to work in my mother’s yard,” Holly said to Mirjeta. “We were going to start this afternoon.” Holly thought that much of what people spoke to each other was something other than what was said, words intended to show affection, or concern; an acknowledgement that the mind sees one, understands one. They could be almost any words,

about a garden or coffee or one's children. They helped with the other words, how one can begin to approach the inexpressible. Holly did not have the words to tell Mirjeta that she admired her and was glad to know her, and so she smiled at her and Mirjeta, beholding Holly's face, smiled too.

Mirjeta turned to Kaltrina, her translator, but Kaltrina had hidden her face in her grandmother's side.

Holly wanted to ask Mirjeta about her homeland that was no more and what it was like to have to leave and then to come here and how does one leave a promise of a life when it has been taken away. Or was it always bombs and fear and was she glad to have left, even her home and her clothes and the graves of her parents and grandparents? What did you leave behind and how do you start again and how do you do, how do you do? Instead she said, "Maybe the girls would like to help us with the flowers."

Mirjeta said something to her grandchildren and they sprang up and went to the door. Holly said to Dean, "I invited them to help," and Dean stood slowly and the men ceremonially shook hands and Dean thanked Mirjeta and Leka and Holly said "Thank you, thank you," and Leka hospitably opened the door and the girls streamed out, into the sunlight, and across the double driveway to Holly's mother's yard.

Holly changed into her old clothes. Nora was at the lamppost, in a pair of old walking shoes, showing her the places where Dean had begun to mark the dirt with a trowel. A flat of pansies lay in the shade. "Now," Nora said. "You have to dig a hole, fairly deep, and water it, then separate out the plant and push the dirt around it, nice and firm. You won't need to water it again till evening. You don't want to overwater a new plant."

The girls stood close by Nora and Holly. Holly lifted the watering can and told the girls what she was going to do. Elira followed her to the side of the house, just beyond the trash barrel at the end of the driveway, and Holly showed her how to turn on the spigot and then how to squeeze the nozzle of the hose and fill the watering can. Elira crouched over her work intently. The can was half-way full and Holly showed her how to let the nozzle go and lift the can, though Holly took the weight of it by the handle and Elira, very seriously and with great care, brought the can across the lawn. Holly helped her set it down. Dean had finished digging the holes and Nora carefully took each plant from the flat. Holly helped Elira tilt the can and soak the dirt.

Kaltrina had retreated to her own yard. She stood on the walkway her father had built and watched Holly and her sister move around the lamppost with the watering can and Holly lift it up and Elira jump up and down, up and down, and Elira tilt the bottom of the can and the water come out like a shower. Holly was taking each plant and setting it into the dirt and showing Elira how to tamp down the dirt around the plant. Her little hands patted the dirt like she was petting a dog, and Holly showed her how to press the dirt firmly with her fingertips. Elira held up her dirt-streaked hands for Holly to inspect, like their mother made them do before they sat down to their dinner. Holly showed Elira how to hold out her hands and she held the watering can over them like a shower and then Holly held the can over her own hands, one by one, and then put the can down and waved her hands in the air, all the while smiling at Elira. Elira jumped up and down up and down, and waved her hands and clapped them and got a spray of water and some dirt on the front of her jumper. Holly raised her eyebrows in pretend shock and got some more water and cleaned Elira's hands. Then Elira looked around for more to do but the flowers were all planted, their little brown and yellow and blue faces tilted toward the sun.

Kaltrina ran across the walkway. She ran up to Holly and said, “My mother will be home in four minutes.”

Holly said, “Would you like to help us till your mother comes home?” Kaltrina nodded her head and she helped Holly fill the watering can at the spigot as she had seen her sister help her and then watered the holes at the front of the house that Dean had made ready under the picture window and in front of the bushes. She and Elira helped Holly take each plant from its receptacle in the flat and she felt the resistance of the plants and saw the trail of roots as she laid them, as she saw Holly do, on their sides on the lawn. This time the flowers were pink and white and Nora was saying something to Dean about the spacing of the holes and so Holly had Kaltrina and her sister count the holes and there were nine, one, two, four, nine, in the rectangle of soft dirt on each side of the front door and Dean covered a few holes and dug them again, though Kaltrina had a hard time seeing that they were any different.

Nora said to Holly, “I miscounted. We’ll have to get another flat tomorrow,” and she picked up the empty flats and went around the side of the house. Dean spoke in a low voice to Holly and kissed her ear and went to the car and got a book and opened the front door and went inside. Holly had to fill the watering can again and again and sometimes Kaltrina helped her and sometimes her sister did, and they watched the holes fill with water and the water disappear into the dirt and then they set the remaining plants in and tamped around them with their fingers. Kaltrina splayed her hands onto the cold dirt that was like Play-Doh almost or something from her mother’s kitchen, a cake a cookie ready to be put in the oven. Kaltrina and Holly and Elira all clapped their hands and waved them at the sky and the water shot in droplets over their clothes.

The little girls were like creatures that ran with lightness and squatted over the earth and said “Yes,” when Holly said “Hold your hands out,” or “Me, me” when Holly said, “Let’s fill the

watering can,” and they swayed over the flowers very close to her and their breath was like the breath of something newborn, it came in little puffs, puff, puff, as if from a great exertion as they tamped the wet dirt around the plants. They all had little droplets of water on their clothes as if they had been caught in a brief rain. Leka opened the front door as Holly was standing contemplatively over the plants and he looked at each of his granddaughters and smiled and nodded briefly at Holly and closed the door. The boy and girl with the low-slung pants sat on the steps across the street again, in front of the one-story house. They sat with their knees together and their forearms resting on their thighs, in an attitude of malign alertness. The boy tamped a cigarette on the step and lit it. The flame flared, like a sudden fire. They seemed to be looking at no one but Holly knew they were aware of her and the girls and of Leka who had shut the door on them after checking on his grandchildren. The boy looked briefly at the closed door and seemed to speak to the girl and then went back into his pose of indifference, a figure guarding the entrance to a forbidding place. The little girls crowded close to Holly and Kaltrina held a finger over the plants and counted and said, “Twelve,” and Elira said, “Huh, huh,” as she tamped the dirt for its own sake and held out her hands for Holly to shower with water.

Holly assessed their work. The line of plants was orderly and straight. There were six additional holes ready to receive more plants. Then the girls looked up at Holly because their work seemed to be done. They looked around for more flowers to plant, at the yard with its mowed lawn and nowhere else for them to water and tamp. They crowded close to her and she could hear their breathing. She took their hands and said, “Tell your grandmother I’m sorry you got your clothes dirty.” There were little flecks of dirt on their clothes. Kaltrina said, “My mother will be home in two minutes,” and Holly took their hands and they went with her across the walk and she waited until their grandfather opened the door and they were inside.

She stood over the new flowers then took the gardening things to the basement and rinsed them in the old zinc sink and put them away and took off her sneakers and washed their soles and walked up the basement stairs in her socks. She stood on the deck. The cardinal appeared as if already in mid-flight, winging from tree to tree. It landed on a branch and flicked its tail, then flew across the yard again, just beyond the deck, a brilliant red creature against the green foliage, as if to be seen, as if to show himself to Holly. She knew then he must have a nest nearby, perhaps in the dense bushes next to the deck, and he was showing himself to her so as to divert attention from it. She went inside and shut the door gently, so he would not have to be concerned for the safety of his nest, so he could go back to his mate and his chicks.

At dinnertime Nora ordered take-out from the Chinese restaurant on North Main Street and they sat down together at six o'clock. After dinner they watched a movie on cable television. Holly sat with her mother on the deck in the darkness while she smoked her evening cigarette. They heard briefly, from across the two yards, through an upstairs window, the excited cries of the girls; their mother had come home. It was late and Dean was waiting for her upstairs and she lay with him under the covers in the narrow bed and he pulled her arm around his chest. Then she lay in her own bed, on her back. The street was quiet, the darkened houses filled with slumbering consciousnesses, as if the houses themselves were dreaming. Later she woke to the sound of a car moving slowly up the street. Its motor seemed large and powerful in the stillness, like the slow thunder of tanks, and Holly was suddenly afraid. She heard two car doors slam shut and the fading sound of footsteps across the street and then there was silence. Later she woke in another layer of darkness to the sound of songbirds announcing the dawn. They called from the depths of the trees, singing and singing, each bird calling its tribal song. She awoke later as if having arrived again in her own body from another place. She tried to remember her dreams.

Dean snored gently in the other bed. She slipped into her clothes and walked softly down the stairs and unlocked the back door. She walked the yard in the thin new light, to the far border and then across to either side. The birds were quiet. She heard a single low chirp, the shaking of feathers, from high in the trees.

For breakfast Nora made blueberry pancakes and bacon, freshly squeezed orange juice and coffee, and they ate together at the dining room table. Holly brought down their Mother's Day gifts, tucked into a small decorative bag she had lined with white tissue paper. Her mother opened the card and read it slowly aloud and read their signatures and placed it open on the table. She reached inside the bag and unwrapped a small box and pulled from it a long strand of pearls, colored pale blue, and ran it admiringly through her fingers. There was another gift, of soap and a companion hand lotion, and she squeezed a few drops of the lotion onto her daughter's hand and rubbed in the scent, then did the same for herself, and the air held the odor of lavender. Nora said, "Thank you, oh thank you, how thoughtful, how beautiful," with genuine gladness, and Holly thought how she often forgot that there was only herself and her mother, and then on other days a few relatives, and some friends here and there, and that to celebrate anything, anything in peace and plenty with another was a gift. Holly kissed her mother's cheek and felt bad about everything, everything, and then she was glad and she blinked her eyes, blinked her eyes, and ran her fingertips under her lower lids, catching an eyelash, catching an eyelash; it was only an eyelash.

Holly put away the breakfast things and washed the dishes while her mother set her birthday card on the mantle. Dean went out to survey their work in the front yard. When he had had another life entirely, he husbanded his property, pruning and mulching and planting. He owned a half acre and a good house and it was all gone, to the lawyer and to his ex-wife. Now in

winter he would point out to Holly a few sticks growing out of the ground and name them. In spring he told her the names of all of the plants they discovered on their walks, and which ones he used to have in his yard. Now, after breakfast, he had a few rows of pansies and impatiens to oversee, and he checked the soil, as he had done the evening before, and packed a plant a little tighter, and stood up and ran the back of his hand across his cheek. Holly drove her mother to a farm-and-garden center to buy another flat of impatiens. As she backed the car out of her mother's driveway she looked across the street in the rearview mirror but nothing was there. Whatever car had come down the street in the night was not evident; all was quiet and still. The little girls' mother's car was gone, taking her to work again, and the door to their house was closed in the morning light.

Holly's mother, having decided on a flat of mixed pink and white flowers, rested it on the floor of the passenger seat. Holly drove them home. She turned into the driveway, gave the flat of impatiens into her mother's hands and walked with her to the front of the house. She heard the clack of Dean's computer keys through the newly installed screen in the door. She looked for the little girls, who she wanted to help plant the flowers. They seemed to her to be a necessary part of this labor, two wood nymphs with powers that would help the plants take root. And then there was Leka, walking across his daughter's front yard, across the furrows, stepping onto the soil that was birthing the seeds he had planted to feed his family. He knelt near the fence line that bordered the street, his knees disturbing the furrows. He was hunched over something on the ground in an attitude of dismay. Holly went to him. He looked at the garden with an old despair, as if he were witness again to something that had been irrevocably harmed. A mass of cigarette butts lay tightly together there, as if they had been dumped over the fence from a car ashtray. The boy and girl sat on the steps of the house across the street, watching Leka in their attitude of

sinister guardianship. The white car was parked in the driveway next to the house. The girl had folded an arm loosely across her knee.

“Evil, evil, evil,” Leka said, and he stood as if to accost them. He looked helplessly at the marred ground. Nora waited by the door, the flat of impatiens in her hand, her mouth pursed. She would probably tell Holly that they shouldn’t be planting a garden in their front yard, as if they were on a farm instead of looking after a house on a street in a city. But then, Holly thought, what does one know to do in a new land, in a new world, aside from try to survive. Her mother must surely know this, having entered so early into a world incommensurate with anything she had imagined of it. Holly found herself covering her mouth with her fingers. Every loss seemed concentrated in the defaced soil. She ran into her mother’s house and pulled the tissue paper from the brightly colored gift bag and carried it across the yard to Leka. She knelt on the ground and spread the paper beside him and began to place the cigarette butts on it. When she was done she folded the sides over and dropped the paper into the trash barrel at the end of her mother’s driveway. Leka watched her, paralyzed with an old rage. Holly returned to him and knelt over the soil and began to repair the furrows.

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