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## The Delicatessen Kids

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*The Delicatessen Kids*

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Languages and Literature  
Of Bard College  
by  
Raina Dziuk

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
May 2018



For everyone whose last name looks like a line on an eye chart.  
To the people who grew up eating strawberries in sour cream for dessert.

To the women with Ukie blood, with thighs that can snap trees and arms that can  
bust the seams of sleeves:  
You are strong like ox.

*In Memory of Sophie Dziuk*



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April 1960

*Chocolate*

Napkins on the left, forks and knives on the napkins, cups on the right, just like Babu showed me. I put my cup on the left though, which messed up the perfect rows on the pretty blue tablecloth that covered the meat table. I had to do it or else I'd get mustard on the sleeve of my sparkly red Christmas dress and Pa would tell me I looked like a slob and he'd send me upstairs to change. But I needed this dress for the song later and it wouldn't work with anything else. I know because Elaine and I have been planning this for four whole days, since they showed the movie on the TV.

Elaine pushed a chair over to the meat freezer to hang up a string of balloons. She was wearing a white sundress because she grew out of her Christmas dress. I said she could borrow one of my other red dresses, but she said she wouldn't fit in it because she was a young lady now and besides, she didn't want anyone to see her wearing her five-year-old sister's clothes. I knew she wasn't talking about just 'anyone' because she never said a word when Ma bought us matching outfits for Christmas and church and stuff. I knew she was talking about Anthony. Ma invited Mr. Sala, our dentist, to the birthday party when they stopped into the deli last week and he was Anthony's dad. She couldn't shut her pie-hole when she found out at dinner that night. Elaine was in third grade now and she told me she liked boys now, even if they were always teasing her and pulling her hair. That sounded mean to me. All of the boys from the block made fun of me whenever Ma would cut my hair short.



Both Elaine and Ma said it meant that they liked me. I didn't get it. They were so mean. Elaine said I'd figure it out when I got to third grade and Ma laughed a little as she sliced my bangs under the piece of tape she put across my forehead. The whole thing sounded like one big secret or something that I'd only find out when I turn eight.

Anyway, the awful scraping noise that the chair made woke the twins up from their eleven o'clock nap. They whimpered in the bottom drawers of the file cabinets. All the other drawers in the cabinet were locked because that's where Ma and Pa kept the important papers. Ma said she put the boys there because of the time Dave rolled off the meat table. When Ma picked him up and brushed him off, rubbing his tiny head like when she made pork shoulder, but gentler because Dave wasn't a pork shoulder. Pa told her not to worry about it because Dziubanovskis have thick skulls. He would knock twice on his own head when he said that, only this time his knuckles were stained with blood from carving the meats. But Ma never leaves them on the meat table anymore and Pa always cusses when he knocks his leg on the open drawers. One time, he kicked Dan's closed while he was in there and no one noticed for a while because he doesn't cry like Dave does. I swished a handful of streamers over their heads and their tiny, scrunched faces, unscrunched, eyes filling up with tears. Dave cracked a gummy smile, showing me all of his one-and-a-half teeth before going back to pouting.

Pa kicked the side door open holding a steaming tray of burgers. It hit the wall so hard that the chains in the meat freezer rattled. That's when the tears came. And the wailing. And Pa's face getting red like beets. I couldn't tell if his face was like

that because of the crying or because of how he stands over the grill. Babu always hollers at him for that. She says he'll finally learn when his nose hairs catch on fire.

No! No! Not over there! I pointed to the spot I left at the table, but Pa pushed the plates and cups out of their neat rows. One rolled off the table onto the floor. He plopped the tray down and some of the juices spilled on the tablecloth and stormed back out of the side door without saying anything. I saw Ma and Babu talking to Mr. Kowalski from the Polish bakery on the corner. He always came in on Sunday mornings. They looked pretty busy. Ma had both hands in a big bowl on the prep counter. And then I remembered that Pa wouldn't close the deli for the party. I heard them arguing about it last night when I was brushing my teeth before bed. Ma wanted to close it for at least until the party was over, but Pa started talking about the bills. He was always talking about the bills. I squatted down between my baby brothers and rocked their drawers like I usually did. Watching them was my job, even though Elaine's the oldest. But she goes to school and I don't, so it's my job. I focused really hard through the crying on the cup on the floor. It was still rolling back and forth on its side. I wondered if the 'don't eat anything that fell on the floor (especially in the back room)' rule was the same for the stuff that you drink out of. I figured since we aren't supposed to eat the cups, that it would be okay if I just put it back on the table. Pa messed up that whole side of the table with the stain and everything. It was all wrong now and that's what Ma asked me to do to help get the deli ready for the party. She and Babu said table setting is the most important part of the meal and that's why they asked me to do it. Usually Elaine does it for dinner because she can carry all four plates to the table in one go without breaking them.

But these plates were made of paper, so I could carry a bunch of them without breaking them! Babu even whispered in my ear that she thought I could do a better job than Elaine after I said I wanted to hang up the balloons and streamers. I looked over at her standing on the chair and her balloon string that drooped low on one side. Babu was right.

Ma walked into the back room holding the biggest bowl of potato salad I've ever seen. I mean, it was the size of Danny and he's the biggest baby ever. Babu said so too, and I know she's seen at least six babies because of my dad and Aunt Anna and Uncle Alex and Uncle George and me and Elaine. And then there was that baby that went to heaven that she and Ma and Pa always light a candle for at church, but I don't know much about him because I learned what the candles meant and asked about the one they always lit. Babu looked down at her shoes and that's when Ma told me I had an uncle that went to heaven when he was a baby. I don't know if I should count him or not. So, seven, I guess. Up until this year, I couldn't even hold Danny on my own because he's so heavy and his head flops around a lot. I spent all winter practicing by helping Ma carry the pig legs in from the car when Pa came back from the farm. I wanted to carry the potatoes like Ma, one sack under each arm, but she said maybe next year. I hated carrying the pig legs because one time the blood leaked from the plastic wrap and dripped down my stockings and got between my toes. Ma couldn't get the stain out from the inside of my Mary Janes. She wanted to throw them out and take me shopping, but Pa said I couldn't get new shoes until I started school next year because he had to pay the bills again and besides, 'they are still perfectly good shoes'. She put the bowl down in the spot I left

open and pushed the meat tray on top of the stain on the tablecloth. The bells on the front door jingled and we heard Uncle Alex's wife squeal a greeting. Her voice made the twins cry a little louder. I heard Babu's feet shuffling around the meat display and heard one of her big wet cheek kisses, the kind that you really have to wipe the wet off after. Ma bent down to pick up the cup and asked me if I had it. I tickled Dave under his chin and he quieted down a bit and started wiggling around. He was really ticklish. Dan wasn't though, so I rubbed his tummy. Ma cracked a smile with that look in her eyes that I could never figure out and went off to greet Uncle Alex, her heels clicked on the floor on her way out.

Max walked in wiping his cheek, followed by Sophie who was fixing her long blonde hair. Max went right past me to Elaine and kicked the chair she was standing on. She wobbled a bit, but didn't fall. They laughed. Max was only a year older than her and he was best friends with Ricky, one of the boys Elaine said teased her in the schoolyard at recess, because they were in the same class at school. Sophie stopped for a second to pet the twins on their little fuzzy heads, but then continued to Elaine who had hopped down from the chair. Sophie was eleven and the oldest out of all of us, except for Pauly, but he was away on a camping trip with the Boy Scouts this weekend so he couldn't make it. She never talked about boys like Elaine did, at least, not that I heard.

Uncle Max and his Irish wife (that's what Babu called her, even though her name is Deirdre) came in and each crouched down to pick up one of my baby brothers. Uncle Max gave me a little hug first. His beard scratched my ear. I'm glad Pa doesn't have one of those. Deirdre told me I've grown a lot since Christmas and I

told her it was because I carried all those pig legs. She scrunched her nose a little and gave Dave a kiss on the cheek. Ma and Babu came in with Anthony's parents. The last time I saw Mr. Sala, he told Ma that he could probably fix my ugly teeth with braces in a couple years when I got a little older. So when he looked down at me and smiled and asked how my chompers were doing, I didn't smile back. I kept my lips pressed tight. He chuckled and patted me on the head. I turned to go stand by Sophie, Max, and Elaine, but all three of them ran out toward the front of the deli, probably because they figured Anthony was here. She still had more streamers to hang up. Ma stood behind me and put her hand on my shoulder, trapping me there in the middle of all the adults and I didn't know what they were all talking about but they were laughing at something. I kept my lips pressed just in case they were laughing at my teeth and leaned back into Ma's tummy. She started talking about how hard Elaine and I were practicing yesterday for our performance and how it was just like the scene from the movie. She squeezed my shoulder like she does when she needs me to speak up. Pa shouts over us when he tells us to speak up, but Ma did the squeeze thing. I like that better because when Pa does his thing, everyone ends up shouting. So I did. I told them about the singing and the dance routine and the dresses I picked out for our costumes. They all looked down and smiled at me and this time I smiled back and stepped forward into the middle of the circle. I told them how it was all my idea, even though Elaine was the one that planned out all the dance steps. I mean, Elaine was in school, so she had plenty to talk about. I helped carry the pig legs here and put stuff on the shelves. I didn't tell them how I wanted

to be Lorelei, but Elaine said I couldn't because my hair was brown and so I had to be Dorothy.

I barely even saw Elaine swiping some cookies off the tray, but she definitely did because when I went out front to hang out with all the kids, Max had some crumbs on his face and chocolate smeared on his fingers. I asked them what they were doing, even though I already knew. The cookies were supposed to be for later. Elaine said they'd found a fancy chocolate and Anthony chimed in that someone must've dropped it. Sophie was busy looking at the pigeon man next door. He was a nice guy. I asked where they found the chocolate and Max pointed down at the floor next to the wooden display shelves that Pa built last summer. The green paint was already chipping off. He held out his hand and right in the middle of his palm there was a little dollop. I said it kinda looked like a Hershey's Kiss. But they found it on the ground and it didn't have the foil on it. I wasn't sure. Max's dark eyebrows lifted and he pushed his hand closer to me. I took a good look at it and picked it up between two fingers. There was some white stuff that covered it. I tried to brush it off but it didn't budge. They didn't know what the stuff was and I told them that Ma would get mad if I ate something off the floor. But then Elaine said that she dared me to eat it and that I couldn't back out of a dare because that would make me a baby. And that Ma wouldn't find out because she's busy inside talking to everyone.

I peeked into the front of the deli. Ma wouldn't know. I thought of Elaine sitting around in the schoolyard with all of her friends and she'd tell them I'm a baby, and then they'd tell their siblings. And how in September my hair still wouldn't be long enough to cover my ears and no one would want to play hopscotch

with me because they'd all call me Boy Baby. Boy Baby. Boy Baby. And then when I get to third grade, no one would want to talk about boys with me and no boys would like me, but I don't know if I'd like them, and what if I liked one and he didn't like me back because he'd think I was a boy? And Elaine would be in upper school by then and they'd all know too. I popped the chocolate into my mouth real fast so I would stop thinking about all that and squished it with my back teeth. It crunched. And tasted sour. Not like Kisses. At first it just tasted a little off, but then a little chunk fell down my throat. It was sorta sharp and I gagged and had to spit the rest of it out. Elaine, Max, and Anthony were howling with laughter. What? I wiped my tongue off on my sleeve and it left brown streaks. My belly felt like it was in a knot and I felt my cheeks get hot. Elaine was leaning up against the front door of the deli, doubled over with laughter and Max was rolling on the ground like a pig in the mud. Sophie was laughing too, but I think it was mostly at her brother because she wasn't looking at me like they were.

Ma called us in and said it was time for the show. I pressed my lips together and stood up tall and pretended the sick feeling wasn't spreading up from my tummy. It was creeping up like a hot coal, but I swallowed it down. She handed each of us a red handkerchief that we draped over our shoulders, just like we planned. She gave me the one with the little white flowers on it because I said it looked like sparkles. And Lorelei and Dorothy wore sparkles in the movie. Anthony, Sophie, and Max sat down on the floor in front of me with their legs bent like pretzels. Sophie rested her chin on her hand and twirled her blonde hair around her finger. I looked out at everyone sitting at the table, at Babu and Mr. Sala and Uncle Max and his Irish

wife. I felt the ball of sick heating up again in my tummy, but Pa had just put the record into the new player he got himself for his birthday that none of us were allowed to touch, not even Ma. The trumpets started going. We pretended to pull the curtains aside and looked at each other, putting our hands up above our heads in big circles and then we had to start singing.

*We're just two girls from Little Rock. We lived on the wrong side of the tracks.*

I remembered Elaine telling me that I always sounded like I was whining when I sang and nobody wanted to hear that, so I sang a little quieter. We put our hands on our hips and rocked them back and forth and took a step forward.

*But the gentlemen friends who used to call; they never did seem to mind at all.*

*They came to the wrong side of the tracks.*

*Then someone broke my heart in Little Rock. So I up and left the pieces there.*

*Like a little lost lamb I roamed about.*

Then came the little spin and Elaine stepping forward to sing this part by herself because that's what Lorelei did. I felt the hot coal trying to push itself back up. I saw Pa clapping along leaning against the table where the cookies were. He had a little smile on his face. Ma had her hand on Deirdre's shoulder, leaning over into



her ear to whisper something. They were both smiling too. We squatted a little next to each other and did the shoulder move.

*I came to New York and I found out that the men are the same way everywhere.*

*I was young and determined to be wine and dine and ermine and I worked  
at it all around the clock.*

We put our hands up to our chests and we were supposed to do a little wink but I forgot because the coal was all the way up now at the top of my neck. I felt my cheeks get hot and I imagined this was what Pa felt like when his face was red as beets. The little pocket under my tongue started to fill up with water like it did when I had to stay in bed all day and Ma had to call Babu over to work the store because she had to be upstairs with me. Now it was Dorothy's turn to sing and I switched spots with Elaine to be at the front.

*Now one of these days in my fancy clothes I'm a going back home and punch the  
nose of the one who broke my heart.*

Then it all came up at once. I couldn't hold it all in my mouth so it started leaking out through my teeth, streaming down my chin, down my neck. I looked down and saw all of my Frosty O's from breakfast all soggy and yellow. A couple of them stuck to my red dress like the roses on the handkerchiefs Ma lent us for the

show. The puddle was right in front of Sophie, who had pulled her knees up to her chest so she wouldn't get splashed. Ma shoved little Davey onto Uncle Alex's shoulder and flew out of her chair toward me. Pa lifted the pin on the record player.

I was scooped up from under my armpits so fast and the next thing I knew, Ma was putting me down outside in the yard. Everything came up again, splattering on the cement. Ma crouched down next to me and rubbed my back. I heaved again. It felt like my whole tummy was going to come right out of my mouth, but it didn't and a string of spit hung from my lip. My eyes stung a little bit and I felt snot dripping out of my nose, trailing its way to my upper lip. Ma pulled the handkerchief off my shoulders and wiped the spit and snot off of my face. She asked if I thought I could make it upstairs. I could only nod because my eyes were starting to water up. We walked over to the fire escape and she boosted me up to the first rung so I didn't have to drag the chair over to stand on. My arms and legs felt all shaky. I could feel the little specks of black paint stick to my sweaty hands. I brushed it off on my dress when I got up to the top and stepped right through the window onto the stool inside. Ma came in right behind me and put her hand on my shoulder, walking me to the bathroom. I couldn't see anything because my eyes were filled up with tears, but I didn't blink them out of my eyes.

Ma pulled my dress straight up over my head and put it in the sink. She picked me up and put me on the toilet so she could unbuckle my shoes and then told me to get in the tub while she turned the water on. I sat down and curled my knees up to my chest, hanging my head down so my cheeks rested on my knees. I squeezed my eyes shut and saw Max rolling on the floor laughing and I saw Sophie put her

hand over her nose and mouth and I saw Elaine's face looking like it did that time that she was holding little Dave and he spit up on her shoulder. I felt the warm water creep up around my ankles. Ma put the toilet seat down and sat, reaching into the tub to touch the back of her hand to my forehead. She started asking me a bunch of questions like what happened and if I felt sick this morning. I just shook my head. I didn't feel sick when I woke up. She filled the little bucket with water and poured it down my back. Ma asked then what happened again because something must've. She asked about the hotdogs Pa made, but I hadn't eaten any. Then I said it maybe could've been the chocolate. Then she squeezed my shoulder again and I picked my head up and looked at the plunger next to the toilet instead of up at Ma and I said it again. What chocolate? The cookies Mr. Kowalski brought over? No. The Hershey's Kiss Elaine gave me. Where'd she get that from? I shrugged even though I knew the answer.

I heard Pa calling up from the yard, then Ma disappeared from the bathroom. I leaned back and slid down until only my face was above the water. Ma yelled down to ask Elaine about the chocolate. She was going to get so mad. I felt it because the air in the bathroom got heavier and my chest got tighter and this time I blinked away the tears. I saw me sitting in the lower schoolyard and Elaine whispering to everyone while looking at me. Then they'd laugh and point, but they didn't say anything. I knew they were laughing at me because Elaine told them that I ate chocolate off the sidewalk. I heard Pa call up again and Ma shouted back and slammed the window shut. Then I heard her shuffling around the kitchen, cabinet doors opening and closing, glasses being clinked together. Her heels started clicking

on the floor coming up the hallway. I held my breath and dunked my whole face under.

Ma was mumbling to herself when she walked in and told me to sit up. I did, wiping the water out of my eyes. She was already pouring the vinegar into one of the tiny glasses. I scrunched my face because I remembered what came after and I'd rather just drink the vinegar. She handed me the tiny glass and told me to swish it around in my mouth and spit it out. Just the smell of it made my nose hairs stand up, but I did it, hoping she didn't bring the round glass bottle. But then she leaned over to rinse out the glass in the tub and I saw the bottle sitting on the edge of the sink. There was nothing that tasted worse than the slivovitz, not even the Kiss from the sidewalk. Ma turned and poured a bit out of the round bottle into the tiny glass, not more than how thick my pinky finger was. I pinched my nose closed and brought the little glass up to my lips. I could already feel it burning. Then I heard Ma talking to herself again, saying that Elaine was going to be kneeling on rice for the rest of the day- I poured the slivovitz down my throat and my whole body shuttered -for making me eat a dingleberry off the sidewalk.

My whole body started to sweat. I leaned forward and heaved again.

December 1961

*Milkshake*

I crouched down, digging my hands deeper into the pockets of my pea coat and let the coat hang down over my knees. My fingers were starting to burn from the cold, even though I was wearing mittens. I always stopped to look at all the windows on the way to the Sears. I loved the little villages set up in the storefronts, the glitter coated roofs of tiny cardboard houses and the tiny kids skating on a frozen pond. They reminded me of Arrow Park, when everyone was over at the pavilion for Saturday night dancing and everything was so still and quiet down by the lake. I wondered if the lake ever froze over like that. I've never seen Arrow in the winter; I'd imagine it's just like that though.

Elaine called me from a few windows down and said she wanted to stop for milkshakes before we had to start walking home. Ma said no pit stops though. We usually went shopping with her, but this year Elaine was in the fourth grade, so she gave us two dollars for stockings and sent us by ourselves. She said she had a lot of de-boning to do at the deli since we got a whole shipment of pig this morning and Pa needed a break. We had to walk around on our tiptoes when Pa was sleeping in his chair last night or Ma said she wouldn't take us to see the vertep. I really liked seeing everyone dressed up. The pastor said I could be in it next year since I'd be in first grade and then I could dress up too.

Elaine grabbed me by my sleeve and pulled me away from the window and past the next one. She said I was taking too long and she was cold so we had to go

inside. The inside of the store looked nothing like it did the last time I was in here in September for school shopping. There was a big tree in the middle covered in ornaments and all the clothes racks had red bows on them. Elaine pulled me toward the back of the store where the socks and shoes were. We each had to get one pair of white stockings and one pair of black ones because those were the ones that we were allowed to wear in school. I really wanted the pink ones because they'd match my coat and the white Mary Janes I was going to wear on Christmas. These were new and didn't have any bloodstains inside them.

I brushed my hand along a rack of velvet dresses and pulled the string on a Chatty Cathy doll. My dad called me Chatty Cathy a lot, especially when he dropped us off at school in the morning, but they only did that when Ma said something bad happened in the neighborhood. I liked those dolls though. I met Elaine over by the socks and she told me to look around. I looked at the big wreath hanging above the checkout counter. She asked if I could even hear her and that maybe my head was too big for my hat. I turned around to see Elaine rolling up a pair of stockings and stuffing them into her coat pocket. I just figured there weren't any baskets left for her to put them in.

Elaine hooked her elbow around mine and we started walking toward the door. Once we passed the counter, my stomach dropped. Elaine yanked me forward, but I dug my heels in. I remembered the men who knocked all the bags of flour and sugar onto the floor and reached over the counter to take the money from the register at the deli. Ma waved the bloody cleaver at them, but they had guns in their pockets. I could see them sticking out a little, just like the ones I saw on the TV when

Pa was watching his show. The men didn't take them out or anything. When Pa found out, his face got all red and he started cussing and Ma told us to go wait in the car. We went to church twice that week.

Elaine yanked me again and her face did the thing where her eyes got big, but her lips turned into a little line. I told her that it was stealing, but her eyes got bigger and she shushed me. I raised my voice a little louder and told her that we can't steal anything. Elaine covered my mouth with her hand and got really close to my face. She said I could have a milkshake with whipped cream and she'd give me her cherry so I'd have two cherries instead of just one. I remembered Ma getting into the car and hitting her hands against the steering wheel really hard. She turned her face away, but I saw she was crying and that was the first time I ever saw that. Her and Pa never cried.

That's when I started to cry, right there in front of the door with Elaine's hand over my mouth. I was sobbing real hard. Snot bubbles were coming out of my nose and everything. I couldn't be a thief. That'd make Ma cry like she did in the car after the men took the money and the pastor surely wouldn't let me into the vertep next year because that was one of the Ten Commandments that we were learning at school. *Do not steal*, because that's a sin and then you'll have to go to confession, but we weren't allowed to go to confession until second grade, so we just practiced in class. I sucked in all my snot and told Elaine that I couldn't make Ma cry. And then I think Elaine remembered that time in the car. I didn't think anyone else saw it but me, but I guess she did because her eyes went back to the regular size and she went

over to the counter and gave the lady the two dollars. We got twenty-five cents back but that wasn't enough for a milkshake.



March 1966

*Sister Anne Patrice*

Light seeped in through the crack where the curtains didn't touch, fracturing the bedroom's floor in two. Daniel lay curled up on his side, sheets cascading off the mattress. David's arm hung down off the side of the bed, fingers grazing the bare shoulder of Honey Ryder with a rusty hunting knife hanging from the waistband of her bikini bottom on the cover of a magazine that he stole from Elaine.

"It's seven, everyone up!" Ma hollered from the kitchen, not fully waking Dan out of his dream. He rolled over to face the wall, dragging the sheets back over his legs. Dave didn't even stir, drool trickled out of the corner of his mouth onto Honey's hip. It seemed like not even a second passed before Ma roared, "I don't hear any movement!"

Dan listened for any sign of activity from his brother's side of the room. Nothing. "It's your turn," his voice crackled, shaking the sleep off of his vocal cords. Dave snored in response. Dan flipped over, grabbed his slipper off the floor and chucked it across the room at his brother. Reluctantly, Dave rolled out of bed, dry tongue smacking against the roof of his mouth, thin layer of crust still gluing his eyelids shut.

The hollow sound of a ceramic bowl clanking against the countertop reverberated down the hallway. Dan clenched in his semi-conscious state. Dave shook the dresser that stood between the two twin beds, opening and closing some drawers. Dan unclenched. A smirk tugged at the corners of Dave's mouth as he

rubbed the crust from his eyes and dropped to the floor, rolling underneath Dan's bed.

Heavy, impending footsteps caused Dan to catapult himself out of bed. He felt a hand grip his ankle, yanking it out from under him. Pain radiated up his jaw into his skull as he hit the floor, opening his eyes to a sea of blue carpet. Dave scurried out from under the bed and to his feet, chuckling, just before Ma pushed open their bedroom door. He kicked Honey under the dresser. "Daniel! Get your ass up! You have twenty minutes to get out of the house!" Dan rolled onto his back, rubbing the hot point of his chin with his palm. Articles of clothing landed on him as Ma flung them out of the drawers. She said nothing else, turned on her heel, and exited the room. Dan chucked his other slipper, hitting his brother square in the chest, before getting up and getting himself ready.

He didn't take any notice of the empty seat at the breakfast table that morning. It wasn't an unusual sight. Pa usually left hours before everyone else even woke up to open the deli for the people who stopped to pick up their lunch on their way to work. The only time the whole family sat down for breakfast was before Sunday morning mass, when they were all wearing outfits ironed with creases so defined it was hard to bend your elbows. Ma, with a head full of fresh curls, sat at the head of the table, a half-empty mug of coffee beside her hand as she thumbed through the newspaper, not seeming to linger on any article for more than a few seconds. Elaine held her juice glass with her pinky out, taking small "elegant" sips with pursed lips. She was no doubt "practicing" for charm school, which she had been bunched up about for weeks now. Sandy rolled her eyes and crunched on dry cereal, crumbs

sticking to her Vaseline-slathered lips. She always insisted on having her milk on the side because she didn't like when her Frosty O's got soggy. Pa yelled at her for being picky on a weekly basis, if not daily at dinnertime when the whole family sat at the dining room table to eat. Dan watched his brother shovel cereal into his mouth, eyes glued to the ticking minute hand on the clock that hung above the refrigerator. He rubbed the small patch of rug burn on his chin and ate his cereal slowly with a stiff jaw.

"I want all of you at the store today right after school," Ma looked up from her paper and stared directly at Elaine. "We've got a truckload coming in this afternoon." Elaine patted her lips daintily with a napkin. On that note, all four kids got up and put their bowls in the sink, Dave shoveled the last spoonful into his mouth en route. They picked up their books, kissed Ma on the cheek, and headed out the door.

Two blocks down, a beat-up pickup truck with whining joints pulled up to the curb. Ricky, a senior with lazily rolled-up sleeves and a black band tied around his arm hung out the driver's side window. He knocked his fist on the outside of the truck's door. "Need a lift?" Sandy got antsy. She knew she would look tough rolling up to the junior high school yard in a senior's truck.

"Where are Dan and Dave gonna sit though?" Sandy looked between Ricky and her older sister, who was already walking around to the passenger's side. "We'd have rice stuck in our kneecaps forever if Ma found out they walked to school alone." She watched as Elaine leaned in so the boy could whisper in her ear.

"You're right. You should make sure they get there okay," Elaine opened the door.

“What?! Ma said that’s your job,” Sandy’s cheeks reddened.

“It’s always my job! Everything’s my job! Can’t you just do it this once?”

Elaine paused. “Here,” she dug around in the pocket of her skirt that Ma had sewn onto the inside earlier that school year and pulled out three dimes. She held it out. Sandy pressed her lips together so tightly Dan thought they’d surely melt together before snatching the coins out of her sister’s hand. Elaine smiled and slid into the passenger’s seat. As soon as the door slammed shut, the truck screeched off, leaving skid marks leading away from the curb. For the rest of the walk to school Sandy was silent. When they hit the bottom of the grammar school stairs, she ran ahead of her brothers wordlessly.

Dan sat through what felt like hours of listening to a nun as old as God himself talk about the Civil War. She might’ve even lived through it. He resorted to staring at the back of his brother’s head, watching him tug on the braids of the girl who sat in front of him, before they were lined up in twos and escorted to the gymnasium for Phys Ed. Dan rubbed his chin and pressed his back against the wall, shoulder to shoulder with Little Jimmy from up the block on one side and Dave on the other, while the coach spoke. Dave chuckled with the guy on the other side of him that Dan couldn’t see. It was Mikey and John’s turns to be captains and pick teams for the relay races. Dan stood up tall and puffed his chest out a little. He knew he wasn’t the fastest, but he still had a solid chance of getting picked before his brother. That came with serious bragging rights.

Dan stepped forward to stand beside Mikey when his name was called. The smug look was wiped off his face once he turned around, realizing Dave wasn’t

standing with his back against the wall anymore. He looked over at Johnny's team and didn't see him. Dan really didn't think too hard about it.

After the first round of relays, Dan walked over toward the water fountain. His chest was tight, lungs pushing against the inside of his ribcage as they heaved for air. It wasn't until then that he noticed that the fifth grade boy's locker room door was open. Curious, he peeked in. Toilet paper was strung over the stalls. Dave sat on the sink, shooting spitballs up at the ceiling, cackling.

The swish of pantyhose covered thighs rubbing together crept up on Dan so fast, he didn't have time to move out of the way before he was shoved away from the door. Dave ran into the stall across from the sink he had been sitting on, and all of his friends followed suit, cramming into the same tiny stall. The cackling became hushed whispers. Sister Ann Patrice busted through the door into the locker room, and all the boys held their breath. She knocked in the stall door and ripped the boys out, one in each meaty hand, tossing them against the wall. Dan watched in horror a safe distance from the scene. When she reached the bottom of the pile, Dave was sitting on the toilet, shorts hanging around his ankles, hands covering his crotch. "Mister Dziubanovski! Pick your pants up and get out here!" She turned to see the rest of the boys shaking in fear, lined up against the wall. One of them shoved Little Jimmy out of the line and Sister bent down in his face, looking him in the eye. Dan could've sworn the kid wet himself because he saw her devil horns peeking out from under her habit.

Dave stepped out of the stall, holding his shorts up by the waistband. "Sister, I just had to go to the bathroom and then all these guys rushed in here," he looked

up at her with the same expression he played when he was in the booth practicing for confession. Dan cringed as she watched Sister lean down into his brother's face.

"Get out of here," she growled at Dave, whipping around to catch one of the other boys by the arm that had tried to tiptoe around her. Dave ran out with his hand shoved down the back his shorts, pulling out the wedgie he got because he pulled everything up too fast.

"You candyass!" Dan yelled accusingly, "you left them in there to die!" Dave shrugged nonchalantly and kept walking, ignoring the half a dozen yelps and harsh cracks echoing from inside the locker room behind him. Dan grabbed him by the shirt and looked him in the eye, "how can you forget cousin Pauly's stories? How dare you, you candyass!"

Dave took a swing at Dan, who ducked out of the way and pushed him against the water fountain. For a moment, he felt as though he was going to explode. A wave of disappointment flashed over him. He let go of his brother's shirt, leaving a patch of wrinkled, stretched out fabric, and walked away without as much as another word. The shrill cries from the locker room faded away with every step.

Dan couldn't even look at his brother for the rest of the day, not until they said the Pledge of Allegiance in homeroom minutes before the final bell rang. He stood square, looking up at the flag that stuck out of the wall over the door, right hand pressed over his heart. He glanced down from the flag for a split second to glare at Dave, shooting invisible bullets from his eye, before returning his attention to the Pledge.

Dan and Dave met up with Elaine and Sandy at the corner between the lower school and upper school. No one even looked at each other on the ten-block walk from there to the deli. When they got there, the delivery truck was already parked outside. Ma walked down the ramp from the back carrying two large crates of cabbage under each arm.

“Go put your stuff down and help me unload.”



























June 1967

*Yolk Boy*

I couldn't go to the pool that day with everyone else, even though I've gone nearly every day in the summer since we moved into the house on 47th Street. The only times I didn't go was when we went to Arrow for the weekend or if I spent all of my allowance money, like today. Ma and Pa give each of us a quarter for the week on Friday. And since I was starting junior high in the fall, I was allowed to ride my bike over to the Wetson's on Friday night for burgers, even though we weren't really supposed to be eating meat on Fridays. I just really couldn't handle another one of Pa's smelly fried fish wrapped in newspaper or the Dziubanovski version of Shit on a Shingle, but with canned tuna. The taste comes into my mouth every time I think about them and it makes me wretch. So, this Friday I gave Dan a nickel to eat mine so Pa wouldn't holler at me for wasting a perfectly good fish. Sometimes he'd stare at me with his arms crossed over his chest until I finished the whole thing. If it came with foot tapping, then that meant he had other things to do and you better eat it quick.

Anyways, Me and Cathy would ride over together, since she lived by the park too and Ma and Pa know her parents really well since she's Rebecca's little sister, and Pamela would meet us there, but sometimes she was late because she had to bring her little brother with her. We'd all sit on the curb outside, eating our hamburgers and watching all of the high schoolers show off their new cars and blast their radios. So that was 15 cents. Then, we all went to Sunday morning mass, Ma



and Pa and Elaine and Dan and Dave, not my friends, but sometimes I saw them there too. When the donation basket was being passed around, I put my last nickel in there because before summer vacation started, I'd go help the nuns clean up the convent after school when I didn't need to be at the deli until later. Babu looked really proud of me when I put a nickel from my allowance into the basket. And now I don't have any money any left to go to the pool.

I watched Dan and Dave shovel their Toasty O's into their mouths and run out the door so fast that Dave left his towel on the back of Pa's armchair. The hollow clunk of the skateboards Pa made them last summer out of old roller skate wheels and leftover planks of wood, hit the pavement outside the front door, followed by the sound of flip-flops slapping their heels as they took off up the block. I was skimming the newspaper that Ma left on the table when Elaine walked through the kitchen, all dolled up with her white hat and light pink sunglasses and perfect curls and one of my books tucked under her arm that she picked off the shelf only because she thinks she looks like the girl on the cover. She was out the door before I could remind her not to mess it up or lose it because I actually liked reading it.

And, just like that, I was alone in the house and it was nine thirty. Everyone I knew was at the pool or on their way there. I sat at the kitchen table for a while, flipping through pages. There were a bunch of pages about kids getting beat up with bats and cops getting hurt and the soldier that lived on 3rd Avenue that got killed in the war. They still thought the lady that lived above the furniture store, the one a block over from the deli, was the one who set it on fire and there was no new news

on the spaceship since two weeks ago. At least it didn't turn into a fireball again, so I guess no news is good news in that case. *You Only Live Twice* was playing tomorrow and *Thoroughly Modern Millie* on Wednesday at The Walker, but I didn't have enough money for the bus to get there and riding my bike there was double the amount of blocks it took to get to Wetson's, so Ma and Pa would never let me go there on my own. I turned to the next page for the television schedule and my eyes got caught on a picture of Marlo Thomas, next to the Thursday schedule, with her long black hair and perfectly straight teeth and white hat. If I wore a hat like that, all of my hair would be hidden and people would think I was bald because Ma cut my hair a few days ago with the strip of Scotch tape across my forehead. I hated it and I hated even more that Elaine didn't have to do it anymore because she was in high school.

The mailbox opened and closed just outside the front door. I put the newspaper on the little table next to Pa's armchair on my way out, hoping the mailman dropped off one of the neighbor's magazines on accident. I'll bring it back over to them when I'm done with it. And it wasn't stealing because magazines aren't sealed. There was just an envelope for Ma from someone whose name looks like a squiggly line. I looked down at the corner of the porch because sometimes the mail falls out or the mailman misses the box. Nothing, just a penny wedged between two loose bricks. I picked it up because maybe if I found enough pennies laying around, I could make it to the pool before lunchtime when Pa brings over roast beef sandwiches and bottles of Coca-Cola for us and squeezes them through the fence. I put the penny in my pocket and turned to bring Ma's letter into the house. I heard

something crack behind me so loud that I felt it through my feet. It was like a brick fell from the roof. I jumped so high you would've thought a snake slithered over my feet.

*"Do you stand or sit?!"* Some boy yelled, but by the time I looked out into the street he was gone. All that was left were burnt shreds of red paper on the sidewalk at the bottom of the steps. Some of the dogs on the block started barking their heads off and the old man who lives across the street peeked out of his window through the curtains and the lady who lives next door stepped out onto her porch, bouncing her crying baby on her hip. Even the mailman ran over to ask if I was okay. I nodded and ran back inside so he wouldn't catch me crying.

I'd gotten used to the teasing and the name-calling. Sometimes the boy who sat behind me in class because his last name started with an E would try to write on the back of my neck with his pen. It happened every year after Ma cut my hair, but no one ever threw a firecracker at me. You couldn't even find any of those hidden in the back of the bodegas anymore! Two years ago when the pool was closed because a kid got sucked into the thing at the bottom that Pa always warned us about, the 5th grade boys who live on the block snatched my Barbie, the one that I dressed up like Nancy Drew, and one boy bit her head off! Then he chucked it into the middle of the pond at the park! Who does that?! Who bites the head off of a doll?! And I couldn't even swim out and get it because the geese were out and I've never met a goose that was nice to me, even though I come to bring them the stale bread from the deli on Sunday mornings after church.

I wiped my eyes on Dave's towel, took a deep breath, and rolled my shoulders back like Ma did when Barbara Blum's mom stopped into the deli. She only really came to ask if Ma could do a favor for her, like picking Babs' little sister up from school and that she'd swing by at 4 o'clock to take her home, but she never came to get her until after dinner. Ma never said no though because Mrs. Blum used to drive me to school every day in first grade because Dan and Dave were still babies. I didn't tell Ma until my last day of school that year that Mrs. Blum stopped at Mr. Kowalski's bakery every morning to buy Babs a chocolate donut with sprinkles while we waited in the car, but never bought one for me. After that, Ma made Elaine walk me to school in the morning, even though she had to pass the junior high school to drop me off.

Marlo stared at me from the other side of Pa's chair, black hair slick and shiny. I went back to my room and gathered up a bunch of things. They all kept falling out of my arms so I lifted the hem of my shirt and put all the stuff on there like a pouch and dumped it all out on Ma's vanity. The golden man on Dan's swim statue looked like it was about to dive into a pool of pantyhose and bobby pins. I cut each leg of the brown pantyhose all the way up to the crotch until the whole thing looked like a bunch of streamers and then slipped it onto my head. A photo of Ma that Pa said he took the year he bought the deli from the Bachmeiers because they were moving back to Germany since the war was over and things were supposed to be better there. Her hair was in a single braid and finished off with a ribbon almost hidden by her curls that rested on the back of her neck. I started braiding. The pantyhose kept sliding back, but that's what the bobby pins were for. I stopped

when I had a long braid draped over each shoulder that went all the way down past my armpits and tied off the ends with pink ribbon I saved from Easter, just like Ma's picture. I pulled open one of the drawers and dug my hand around in it until I found the pink powder that Ma pats onto her cheeks even though her cheeks were always rosy, and a shade of lipstick that I liked, a very pale pink. It was the closest color I could find that matched my ribbons. As I swiped it onto my lips, I remembered Ma coming back from the beauty parlor one afternoon with her hair all done up nice because one of her cousins was getting married and she sat down in this chair leaning forward toward the mirror with her mouth open in the shape of an O as she painted a darker shade of pink onto her lips. When she was done, she looked down at me sitting on the little foot stool I brought in from the bathroom and she told me, *you're never ready to go unless you were wearing lipstick.*

I took one last look in the mirror, seeing myself as a pretty girl with long brown hair and pearly pink lips. I felt ready to go. I put on a skirt and borrowed one of Elaine's hats. I remembered the penny I had put in my pocket earlier and dropped it into my purple, velvet purse. Before I headed out, I checked the shoebox under my bed to see if maybe I had a coin or two hidden underneath the magazine cut outs, Coney Island seashells, and the bracelet I borrowed from Elaine that she never asked for back so it was mine now. I couldn't find any, but I found a penny in the bottom of our hamper and another one underneath one of the couch cushions. Now I had two more to go and just an hour to make it to the pool before Pa came by. The next best place I thought to look was on the sidewalk. People drop stuff there all the time. Just last week, Dan and Dave came home with a book of matches and a silver

necklace chain with a broken clasp. It wasn't actually broken when they found it. Dan said he was the one who spotted it, but then Dave yanked it from him because he wanted to give it to the girl he had a crush on when she got back from visiting her aunt and uncle in Jersey. So, that's how the clasp broke.

I started walking toward 5th Avenue instead of 6th because I didn't want to walk past St. Agatha's, and plus, 5th Avenue is where all the stores are. I didn't find anything all the way until I passed by the pizzeria on 56th, the one that was between the appliance store and the furniture store with the hairdresser that works above it. She's always halfway hanging out the window yelling at Sal the Pizza Guy because she has rats upstairs. The last time she was wagging a hairbrush at him so angrily that I thought she was going to bounce it off his head. Anyway, when I went to pick the penny up it was stuck to the sidewalk pretty good. It took me a good couple tries to pry it up, then I found out it was stuck there because of a piece of chewed gum. I took a turn at the shoe store on the corner that we never shopped at because Pa said the owner was a crook for charging so much money for cheap crap. The whole way toward 4th Avenue I tried to peel the gum off the penny I found, but it just kept stretching and sticking to my fingers, probably because the sidewalk was so hot. I gave up and put it in my bag anyway. When I saw the building with the circle windows and the two towers that looked like they were supposed to be attached to a castle, I was just down the street from the deli. It wasn't noon yet though because I didn't hear the Lutheran church ring its bell. We were too far away from our church to hear that bell.

Since I knew the ringing would happen any time now and I only had 4 cents, I walked toward the deli trying to come up with a good excuse for why I wasn't at the pool with Elaine and the boys. The best I could come up with was that I left so I could eat lunch with them and stand in the walk-in for a little bit. I did that sometimes when it was really hot out and I needed to cool off. Or when I get a bad sunburn. I'd always pick through the boxes until I found a chocolate popsicle. Ma and Pa didn't mind. They would rather me come here for ice cream than go next door.

The pantyhose slid back a little on my head and that's when I remembered about the lipstick. I could see Ma working the cold cut slicer behind the counter. Then Pa stepped out holding 4 brown paper bags. I covered my mouth and ducked into the Pigeon Man's store next door and rushed all the way to the back where he usually sits if he isn't out in front on his rusty lawn chair. He looked up at me and smiled, confessing that for a second he thought I was Dorothy from The Wizard of Oz with my long braids and little bows. I said thanks and asked him if I could have a napkin. The Pigeon Man didn't ask why I didn't just go next door and grab one from behind the counter. He was always really nice to me. While I was wiping off my lipstick, he told me about the new babies that had been laid two weeks ago and that since he was a man of his word, I can go out to the coop behind his shop and pick one out. For forever I'd been asking him if I could have one of his eggs so I could raise a baby pigeon and train it to fly at the boys who picked at me and peck their stupid eyes out. Then I could walk around with it perched on my shoulder so I could be the first girl pirate of Sunset Park. I stuffed the napkin into my purse and walked

out to the yard. It only took me a second to choose an egg. There was one whose shell was just a little bit pink and that was the one I wanted. When I got back in I showed him and he said he knew I was going to pick that one. He asked if I knew what I was going to name it once it hatched. And then I heard the bell start to dong it's first of four sets of three. That's how you know its 12 o'clock. I slipped the egg into my purse and apologized and told the Pigeon Man that I'd stop by to tell him tomorrow once I decided as I ran out of the shop.

As soon as my foot hit the sidewalk, I heard the little ringing sound that bottle caps make when you kick them across the pavement. I looked down and there was the last penny I needed to get into the pool. I snatched it up and started running as fast as I could up 4th Avenue toward the park. I could make it there before Pa because the second set of dongs just started. I don't think I'd ever run that fast, not even when cousin Pauly chased me around with the dead frog he'd fished out of the pond. When the pantyhose started slipping again, it started to take the hat with it, but I just pressed my hand down on top and kept running. When I saw the building with Jack's Real Estate painted on the side of it, I turned the corner toward the park. I heard a loud crack again, the one that sounded like a brick, followed by a shrill squeal and a car horn honking. Then, I saw two boys dash out from between the last house on the block and the Key Food. I called out after them, but that just made them run faster and up the steps into the park. I finally caught up to them by where the old carousel used to be. I'd only seen pictures of it. We were all huffing and puffing so hard; I felt like I was going to faint.



“Are you the guys that threw the firecracker at me this morning?” I was more accusing them than asking. I adjusted the hat on my head and pulled my braids in front of my shoulders. That’s when they dropped down to their knees laughing, falling forward onto their hands and elbows and rolling in the grass. I grabbed the guy with the knapsack by the strap and pulled him over onto his back. I asked him again. His pudgy face looked like a tomato that was too ripe and he had been laughing so hard that he wheezed when he paused to take a breath. This time I ripped open the zipper of his bag and two red Cherry Bombs rolled out onto the grass.

*“So which is it?”*

I swung my arm all the way around and cracked him over the head with my purse. The yolk started leaking out from the purple velvet, dripping down his face from his forehead down his nose then over the corner of his mouth. The boy shrieked and wiped the goo off his lips with his hand. His friend looked like he was too freaked out to laugh but I could tell he wanted to, so he just sat there looking up at me with the face Dan used to make when he was potty training and had to poop. Yolk Boy’s eyes got all shiny and he pressed his lips together real tight. Another string of yolk streamed down his face. I stuck out my hand to help him get up, but he swatted it away. I shrugged and turned on my heel, flipping a braid over my shoulder like the pretty girls on television do when they’d just done something bad but they weren’t sorry about it.

And that’s when I saw Pa walking across 44th Street with the four brown paper bags in his hands. I took off toward the pool, nearly knocking over a baby

carriage on the way. When I got to the gate, I turned my purse upside-down over the teenager's cupped hands. Out came the crushed eggshell and the lipstick napkin and the five pennies all covered in yolk. The boy looked at me and his hands like I just handed him a dead bird, but all five cents were there, including the one with gum stuck on it, so I ran right in through the gate and ripped my pantyhose braids off my head. I crashed into the fence right next to Dan just as Pa was walking up to them. Dan said ewwww and I looked down to see yellow goo smeared across his arm. A little yolk splattered on my foot, seeping in between my toes. And then I looked behind me and saw the trail of splotches I left behind.

July 1968

*Medvedeva*

Dave slid a cardboard box off the bottom shelf of the fridge. It was dented and torn, looking as though an animal had taken a bite on each side, leaving behind mangled flaps that bounced when he set it down on the kitchen table. The thin red and yellow stripes printed on top of baby food-green clashed violently with the peach colored flowers that had been delicately embroidered onto the tablecloth. The word 'Misunderstood' was boldly printed between the shredded sides.

"Hey, Pa? Can we bring the BB guns camping with us?" Dave reached into the box and started pulling out cans of Dr. Pepper, stuffing as many into the side pocket of his rucksack as he could fit.

"We're just gonna shoot the empty cans before it gets dark. They're the ones that have the big red dot on the side that make good targets," Dan stood over by the counter, under an open cabinet door whose hinges squealed every time a breeze came through the window above the sink. He had a fist full of Slim Jims in his hand that he tucked away in the front pouch of his rucksack.

"Pa's out back," Elaine called out from the bathroom. She was getting ready to hang out at the pavilion with her friends, even though no one was going to be there because Thursday nights are for dancing and today was Wednesday.

"Ya got the church key?" Dan asked his brother as they passed each other, swapping spots in the kitchen to fill the empty spaces in their bags with snacks. Dave held it up for his brother to see and put it back in his pocket.

They met back up in the living room. Dan adjusted the brim of his baseball cap and Dave snagged an extra soda for the walk over to the meet-up spot down the hill. The two of them headed out the door and around toward the backyard. One of Sandy's legs dangled from the tree outside. Muddy, untied shoelaces flapped along with the rustling leaves. Her other leg was bent across the branch she was sitting on with a book open in the middle of the triangle her legs formed. She hated being here with all of the spiders and the mosquitos, and God forbid her foot touched the slime at the bottom of the lake or a little sunfish swam too close to her ankles when she stood in the shallow part where all the babies played. If she wasn't inside the bungalow, she was either in the tree that stood outside her bedroom window, or in the main house helping Marushka and her daughter, Aniyah, in the kitchen. The twins, however, weren't even allowed to step one toe behind the counter without Marushka hollering and violently flailing her handkerchief at them. She never seemed to use her handkerchief for anything else.

Dave waited for his brother to turn the corner toward the garden to yank Sandy's leg. She yelped and kicked her other leg out for balance while digging her pink fingernails into the bark of the branch above her. Her book was tossed against the side of the house, landing face down on the grass below her window. He popped the top of the can open and slid the church key back into his pocket.

"Later, Egghead!" He took the first sip and disappeared around the corner of the bungalow. He bounded across the garden, soda splashing out every time his boot touched down in the soil. He felt Ma's glare like a red hot steel poker before even looking up, realizing it was the third week of July. There she was, glaring at him from

her lawn chair and making note of every step he took. That was harvesting week. Each day, she'd pick specific things: lettuce and carrots the first day so she can plant another round before the end of the season, all the blueberries, blackberries, and raspberries on the second day for jams, all the eggplants that she pinched back in the beginning of June on the fourth day, and onions, garlic, and potatoes over the last two days of the week. She took her time with those last ones to make sure she got all of them, because sometimes those hide. She kept what she needed from her harvest and spent most of the fourth week walking boxes full of the rest of the fruits and vegetables up the hill to the main house so Marushka could use it to feed the guests that come up and stay for a couple days at a time. That was just Ma's thing, and she was really proud of it. That's why whenever any man offers to move all the produce into the deli from the delivery truck, she just smiles and says, you can take these, handing him two boxes, and I'll get the rest, and she'll come back out of the truck carrying triple the weight with a large box under each arm and bags of fruits hanging from each finger. When she put it all down in the corner of the deli, the corners of her mouth would curl into a smirk. She'd look down at Elaine and Sandy stocking the shelves and said, Dziubanovski women, we're strong like ox, in the thick Ukrainian accent she imagined her mother would have had. Then she'd disappear into the back of the delivery truck again to gather all the loose items that fell out during the drive down to the city.

Dan was already standing in front of Ma and Pa, but from the look of it, he didn't ask yet because Pa still had his beer in his hand and hadn't put it down in the grass yet, propped up against the leg of his chair. It was automatic now, ever

since he got all worked up that one time and accidentally flung beer all over Ma. She trained that into him with one look that practically shot bullets out of her eyes at him that whole summer every time his face started changing shades of pink. Dave stopped next to Dan and didn't waste any time, getting straight to the point.

"Can we bring the BB guns with us to shoot some cans before it gets dark?" Everyone's eyes shifted from Dave to Pa's beer bottle, except for Pa, because he was looking at Ma.

"You said they were pretty good the last time you took them shooting," she shrugged. No one came back covered in blood, or missing a tooth, or with poison ivy on their eyelid like Elaine three summers ago. At first they thought she just had an eye infection from the water in the lake, but then the side of her face bubbled up like blisters and she wasn't allowed to touch anything for four days until she could open up her eye again. Pa leaned forward in his chair, but he didn't put down his beer.

"I did say that," he nodded, surrendering to the compliment he gave them last Saturday. Pa kept thinking about it for a moment, staring down at the grass poking up around his feet. No one moved a muscle until Pa made his decision. "Fine, but what are my two rules?"

The twins stood up straight, shoulder to shoulder with their arms pressed to their sides. "Don't shoot any animals and don't shoot each other," Dave's voice lagged a little behind Dan's.

"All right," Pa stood up and started walking over to the shed that was built up from a doghouse. Wowwie never used it because he liked to sleep on the couch, so Ma and Pa built some shelves and put all their gardening tools and stuff like that in

there. Pa unlocked the wooden door and reached in, pulling the two rifles out from behind the fishing poles. "The second the sun starts going down you stop shooting. Don't touch them. Don't even look at them. You hear me?" He put one in each of his sons' hands. They nodded, looking Pa right in the eyes. He taught them, when they were younger, to always look a man in the eyes because that's how he can tell if the guy has any tricks up his sleeve. Pa reached back in and picked up two half-used cartons of Crosman Copperheads from the shelf right next to the door before locking up the shed.

Dan and Dave looked down at their hands and tried to hide their excitement; both imagining what it was going to be like to shoot stuff without Pa breathing down their necks. They kneeled in the grass trying to find a pocket with enough space to fit their cartons into. Dave crammed his into the one with all the Slim Jims and all three of them knew it because they heard a little pop followed by breathing in the scent of the spiced jerky. It was the kind you could taste in the back of your throat just by smelling it. The boys stood up, shook Pa's hand just like he taught them and waved goodbye to Ma who was still sitting with her legs stretched out in front of her, wearing sunglasses even though the brim of her floppy hat cast a shadow over her whole face.

"If one of you comes back missing an eye, we'll kick both of your butts into the middle of next week," Ma waved back. "And tell Toby and Markus to tell their parents we said hi and we'll see them tomorrow night at the pavilion!"

Dave finished his soda as they reached the bottom of the hill. Two square pillars that were at least three times the height of them stood in the grass just off the

only road you could drive on to get to the lake and the main house. Aniyah said that its not just two towers of stone and that there was a surprise coming this winter that no one would get to see until next summer. Even her mom wouldn't tell her what the surprise was.

Toby, wearing his big yellow hat, and his older brother, Markus, popped out from between the trees on the other side of the road. That was the shortcut to get here from their family's house in Harriman, which was less than a ten minute drive past Arrow. It wasn't really a shortcut though; it was just better than walking along the side of Route 9. Markus had a hunting knife hanging from his belt that he took out of the leather sheath to show off to Dan and Dave, who were already holding their BB guns out for Markus and Toby to check out. Markus held Dan's up to his shoulder and pointed it down at the grass. He closed one eye and squinted down the length of the barrel from rear sight to front sight. He handed it back to Dan with a nod of approval as the four boys walked into the woods behind the pillars.

"I heard your mom made a scene at the beach a couple weeks ago." Markus slashed through the thin, low-hanging twigs at the head of the pack. "What was that all about?"

"Old Man Stan caught us bagging one of the boats from the dock and he walked right over the little hill behind his shed to the beach to tell Ma." Dan readjusted the BB gun tucked under his arm so it wasn't pointing at his brother's calves.



"All you have to do is pull the rusty nail out of the wood and toss the chain into the boat." Markus paused for a second. "Wait, you guys hid the oars in the bushes, right?"

"Yeah, of course! Everyone and their mother knows that!" Dave added, tossing his rifle from hand to hand as he walked. "Ma was asleep in her chair and he woke her up!"

"We heard she wiggled out," Toby shouted from the back of the pack.

"We were about to drop our lines in the water when she started yelling our names across the entire lake, telling us to come back."

"What'd you guys do?" Both Toby and Markus stopped walking and turned to face the twins.

"We paddled faster! Around the back of Whale Island." The butt of Dave's BB gun bounced off of the trunk of the tree next to him. He fumbled to grab hold of it before it hit the ground.

"It was safe to hide out there for a bit, at least--"

"We cast our lines out off the shore. Nothing was biting, not even a nibble," Dave cut in. "Ma's hollering probably scared all of the fish! They knew to hide too!"

"-Yeah, well, we figured that Ma would've cooled off by dinner time..."

"Did she?"

"We should'a thought to bring snacks."

Dave slung his rucksack against the base of a tree and started unloading the Slim Jims and Dr. Pepper, piling it all up in the middle of the little clearing that Cousin Pauley always brought them to. His fire pit was still there with the rocks

around it, and a couple shriveled chunks of charred wood. Everyone else tossed their snacks into the pile. With the amount of jerky and Slim Jims the boys tossed into the middle, they could have fed a whole squad of soldiers. Markus and Toby's parents even sent them with a stack of venison jerky that they made this summer out of the six-pointer his dad brought back from his big winter hunting trip. They kept it in the freezer through the whole spring so they could cure it the right way once it got warmer.

The four of them sat around their loot mound until the pile of empty, greasy plastic wrappers started to get bigger than their snack pile. By then, they got the fire in the pit going and each of them had enough soda cans for target practice to last them well after dark. They all took turns pinging the empty cans off of the fallen log on the far side of the campsite. Dave talked everyone's ear off about the Italian girl he liked. She went to his school even though she lived on the Bay Ridge side of the Gowanus Expressway. It was a straight walk up 5th Avenue, so sometimes he'd see her walking past the deli on her way home with her two older brothers.

Markus told everyone that he found the keys to the old VW Buggie that had been rusting on their front lawn for ages. No one was really sure who it belonged to because their whole family shared the house, but the keys were hanging up on a nail under the stairs in the basement where the stuffed doe that had its nose blown off by his uncle's shotgun stuck out from the wall. They had to put a red clown's nose on it to hide its missing snout. Grandma Ivy wouldn't let them keep it upstairs because what she says goes. She was the kind of lady that chained herself to the

White House fence to demand that women should be allowed to vote. They had a picture of that on top of the fireplace.

The boys spent the rest of the night coming up with ideas for stuff they could do with the Bug. They could drive it down to Texas to visit the uncle that shot the deer in the nose or drive it to the Science Museum in Philly because Pa took the whole family there for a vacation right after school ended. They didn't even stop at home to pack. Their bags were already in the trunk when Ma and Pa came to pick them up from school, then they picked up Sandy and Elaine. Elaine blabbed into the tape recorder Pa brought for the whole family to use for the entire drive to the museum. Sandy stole it at one point and started reporting every piece of road kill they passed, trying to guess what animal it was. Elaine slapped her across the face with her flip flop so hard that the waffle print on her cheek didn't go away until we were looking at all of the plans for the new rockets they were going to launch to the moon.

Dan woke up to the sound of twigs snapping and leaves crunching. The sun was barely up yet and there were still a couple of glowing chunks in the fire pit. He looked out across their campsite, at the dozens of aluminum scraps scattered on the far side. They must have gone through both boxes of Copperheads because there were so many holes in the cans that no one would be able to tell they once held Dr. Pepper anymore. Another twig cracked, followed by the sound of digging. Dan kicked Dave in the neck to wake him up. He didn't realize it, but Dave coughed real hard and sat up in his sleeping bag. He saw Dan holding his finger up to his lips and

then pointed toward Toby and Markus. Dave shook Toby's leg to get him up. No one wanted to wake Markus up though because they knew that he had his massive hunting knife in his sleeping bag with him. The sound of twigs and leaves crunching and digging continued until they were all sure it was getting closer to their campsite. Toby grabbed his brother's foot and shook it until Markus rolled over to face the inside of the horseshoe shape all their sleeping bags were making.

"There's something moving around out there. We keep hearing it digging," Toby whispered.

"Go back to sleep. It's probably just a chipmunk," he was about to roll back over, but then he heard the twigs and chipmunks aren't heavy enough to make that kind of cracking noise. "Maybe a deer."

The crunching started creeping up to their campsite, until all four of them could hear the thing breathing heavily.

"What if it's a bear?" Just the thought started to drain the blood out of Toby's face.

"Do we have any leftover jerky around?" All of them scanned the small clearing.

"I think we finished all of it last night."

"Okay, then we're going to be fine. Everyone just needs to stay really still, kinda like we're playing dead." All four boys pulled their sleeping bags up to their noses. Only the tops of their heads and big, panic-stricken eyes poked out from their cocoons. Dave reached one arm out and pulled his BB gun closer to him.

A shadow, twice as big as any of the boys, cast onto the huge rock just a couple yards behind Dan's head. The figure wobbled on its two hind legs before collapsing back down on all fours with a loud thump that the boys felt through the ground beneath them. Dave propped himself up on his elbow and raised his gun so the sights lined up, swinging it back and forth between the tree and the rock. He had his thumb on the safety and his index finger hooked around the trigger. Everyone was paralyzed with fear with their eyes glued to the shadow on the rock. It stood back on two feet and stepped out from behind the tree.

*Click.* Dave pulled the trigger and nothing came out of the muzzle.

"Oy!" An old woman jumped up, her pale yellow babushka didn't move from its place because it was knotted so tightly under her chin. The boys couldn't even scream. Half a dozen mushrooms spilled out of her wicker basket onto the ground, rolling between aluminum shards. Dan let out the breath he'd been holding in since Dave picked up his BB gun. He lowered it, digging the muzzle into the dirt in front of him. A chipmunk scurried up the tree behind the babushka lady. She dropped down to her hands and knees to recover the mushrooms that had rolled away from her. "Chipmunks. They aren't good eats anyway. Too much bone, not enough meat."

All four boys unclenched and took a deep breath to stretch out their lungs that felt as if they were pressed, flat, against their ribcages. Their hearts still thumped wildly. The babushka lady stood up and hobbled across their campsite and disappeared into the maze of tree trunks.

“Well, we ate all of our snacks. Might as well head home for breakfast,” Markus was the first to sit up and unzip his sleeping bag. He was the oldest, so everyone figured he was right about everything.

With shaky hands and bloodless skin, the boys gathered up all the Slim Jim wrappers and scraps of metal and shoveled it all into their bags. Toby stomped the last remaining glowing splinters. The charred remainder of the log he put in just before crawling into his sleeping bag crunched under his weight. None of them bothered rolling their sleeping bags back up; instead they were slung over a shoulder, or laid out across the top of a rucksack. Dan slid his right through the shoulder straps, across his lower back, so his sleeping bag wouldn’t drag along the ground and collect nettles.

“You should’a seen all your faces!” Markus’ laugh pierced through the silence just as they stepped out onto the grass behind the stone pillars. He tried to contort his face, stretching the corners of his mouth back as far as they could go, and raising his eyebrows that naturally curled up at their peak into little horns. The rest of them joined in on the laughter, so they weren’t the one who was being laughed at and kept going, imagining all the reasons why anyone would be gathering mushrooms before the sun came up.

“You guys should come over to Harriman after breakfast, I think we’re going to try to get the old VW running if you want to help out?” That’s what they called their house, even though it’s the name of the town it’s in.

“Yeah, for sure.” The twins nodded their heads before heading up the hill toward the main house. Their bungalow was just a little bit past the room with the

wall of windows that overlooked a patch of trees that had fallen that left behind trunks with pointed tips that faced the glass panels.

Before they even made it into the house, the light, wafting scent of freshly brewed coffee and cheesy eggs tickled their noses. Dan pushed through the screen door, putting his bag down next to all the boots crusted in dried mud, and propped his BB gun up against the wall behind the coat rack. Dave trailed behind, his stomach growling as he walked into the kitchen.

“So? How’d it go?” Pa stood up from his seat at the breakfast table. He was all worked up, but not the kind where his forehead vein looked like it was going to burst and squirt all over everything.

“Well, they both still have two eyes, so it couldn’t have gone too terribly,” Ma looked up from the newspaper. She had picked it up from the main house yesterday afternoon when she swung by to tell Marushka to start clearing space in the kitchen to store all the things from her July harvest. She never got around to reading it since it was tomato and bell pepper day.

“It was great! We almost had a run in with a bear!” Dave cracked a big smile and Ma put down her newspaper. “Yeah, and I was ready for it, had my sight lined up and everything. You shoulda seen the shadow it cast. It was bigger than you!”

The corners of Pa’s smile started sinking, little by little, as Dave told the story. Instead of his face getting all red, it looked like every crease in his forehead dried right in its place like cement. Even his cheeks looked like they were stuck there.

“And when it stepped out, click!” Dave mimicked the jump of the rifle with his hands held up in front of his face, one eye closed, the other staring intensely at the

clock above the sink. "But I forgot we must've gone through all the BBs last night. And then it wasn't even a bear! It was just the babushka lady! The one that brought all of the weird tasting roots to the 4th of July potluck!" He was talking so fast Dan couldn't even keep up with him.

*Whap!*

"I told you to follow the goddamn rules!" Pa's hand caught Dave in the back of the head so hard that Dan thought he heard a brain rattling around in there. He stormed past the twins into the living room and knocked the coat rack into the wall before coming back toward the kitchen. He held the two rifles across his chest with one hand like a pile of sticks.

*Whap!*

"What was that for?" Dan reached up to rub the back of his head. He scrunched his nose and turned his head to look up at Pa. "I didn't do anything."

"You shoulda stopped him!" Pa pushed the boys toward the kitchen table. "Whatever you two thought you were going to do today, it's not happening. After breakfast, you're going to walk down the road to Mrs. Medvedeva's bungalow, the little red one right before the sharp turn that goes into town, and you're going to apologize for pulling the trigger in her face. Both of you. You're lucky she didn't have a heart attack right there!" Pa turns to head out the front door.

"But we didn't even shoot anything. We didn't break the rules," Dave whined. Ma, Elaine, and Sandy all stopped chewing and raised their eyebrows as Pa crept up behind him. He crouched down so his face was hovering over his son's shoulder.



“Sit your ass down and eat,” Pa hissed into Dave’s ear. “You’re gonna bring over some stuff from the garden too.” He stood up. “And if I hear your apologies aren’t sincere enough, both of you are kneeling in rice until dinner. And by then, you should have a better apology ready.” Pa walked straight through the living room and out of the house. The screen door bounced against the house a couple times before slowly screeching shut.

June 1969

*Kielbasa*

Cowboys galloped across the television screen followed by yips and pops of gunfire. Dave stretched out across the couch, shoving his twin brother, Dan, up against the arm. He dug his heel into his brother's thigh, the slightest smirk tugged at the corner of his mouth, but he never looked away from the screen. Without a word, Dan stood up and gripped the blanket Dave was lying on, yanking it out from under him in one swift motion. Dave spun off the couch, knocking into the television stand. The antennae on the set shifted; the Wild West was replaced by static.

Ma had been standing over a steaming pot, wooden spoon in hand, humming and shuffling her feet to the tune, when she heard the thump followed by silence. No more hoof beats and gunshots. No bickering. All that lingered was the thick odor of boiled cabbage. Silence was never a good sign. Silence meant something was broken or was about to be broken. It meant trouble.

"Danieldavid, Daviddaniel!" she hollered, without even having to think twice about which one of them was responsible for whatever damage had been done. After ten years, she stopped trying to guess. Chances are both of them had something to do with it.

Dave immediately released Dan from the half nelson he had his brother in when he heard his mother's voice. They sat, frozen for a moment until they heard the almost aggressive clang of a lid covering a pot. They scrambled toward the kitchen, shoving elbows into each other as if there would be a penalty for being last.

Ma set a tray of kielbasa on top of the stove to cool, tossing her oven mitts onto the wooden countertop. Her bare hands were tough, calloused from working on a farm through her youth, but still delicate with long, thin fingers. The boys stood in the threshold; Dan rubbing his arm, his face showing no pain. Dave opened his mouth to speak, no doubt about to blame the whole commotion on his brother somehow, but Ma cut him off with a loud sigh.

"Just go set the table." They knew the drill. Ma brushed some hair out of her face with the back of her hand and glanced over at the clock above the sink. She massaged her temples and pushed the oven door closed with her heel. "If Elaine and Sandy are late to dinner again this week..." her voice trailed off as she turned back to the stove, turning down the flame to prevent a pot from boiling over. The boys walked over to the cabinet. Dave began to climb halfway onto the counter in order to reach the dishes, while Dan waited for them to be handed down.

Elaine shouldered the front door open and tossed her schoolbooks onto the floor next to the couch, hurriedly. Sandy followed close behind. "You wouldn't even have fun." Elaine tried to play it off. She lowered her voice to just above a whisper, "it's just going to be a bunch of sweaty hippies and Sophie's poetry geeks." It was going to be a good weekend, but Ma didn't know she was going, let alone going with her boyfriend, and that would not sit well.

"I don't mind sweaty hippies," Sandy whined, her crooked teeth peering out from behind her lips. Her voice was shrill. She dropped her books beside her sister's. "Plus, your boyf-," Elaine clapped her hand over Sandy's mouth just before walking into the kitchen, glaring at her with gray, dog-like eyes. Sandy received the message,

loud and clear.

“Can one of you drain the potatoes?” Ma asked, as she poured soupy cabbage into a serving dish. Elaine bent over in front of a cupboard and pulled out the plastic strainer, setting it down on the counter. She was kind of just hoping her sister would nudge her out of the way. She had graduated from table setting to being allowed to help with the food now, since the twins could sort of reach the dish cabinet without losing balance and smashing their heads on the linoleum checkerboard of the kitchen floor. Sandy actually liked helping Ma in the kitchen, despite the fact that the cabbage scent clung to her clothes and the sharp smell of onion could survive several hand washes. Unfortunately, she wasn’t very good at the actual cooking part. The food gene must’ve skipped her. That’s why she was only in charge of restocking the shelves in the family’s delicatessen. Even the twins helped out with the sandwiches after school a few days a week.

Sandy snatched the strainer and dumped the pot over it. A flash of steam rose from the porcelain sink, fogging up the kitchen window. A single potato bounced out of the sink and hit the floor. Sandy picked it up quickly and tossed it back in with the others, fingers crossed no one saw. The front door was forced open, once again. Elaine left the kitchen to go check on the status of the table setting, since standing around doing nothing during the pre-dinner hours was unacceptable. She figured she might as well pretend to do something productive. At least chastising her little brothers for horsing around with dinner plates in their hands was better than being asked to help with the slimy cabbage.

Pa closed the door behind him, eyebrows knitted as he mumbled to himself.

He stepped over the books to hang his hat up on the rack with a grunt, lips pressed together tightly. He noticed the static on the television, pausing to fiddle with the antennae for a few moments before sighing in surrender and turning off the set. Immediately upon entering the kitchen, he watched Sandy drop a potato in the sink, then look around the room with a twinkle of panic in her eyes. "You went to school looking like a *shlyukha*?!" Pa picked up a rag from the counter and put it in Sandy's hand, pushing her off into the direction of the bathroom. He shook his head, disappointed, pressing a meaty hand to his cheek. "Take that off before you sit down at my table."

"It was the last day of school," Sandy slinked off toward the hallway, "I wanted to look nice."

"Yeah, because she wanted Tom to ask her to go to Coney Island with him and Mikey after school let out," Dave called out from the living room.

Dan jabbed his brother in the arm with a fork. Dave yelped, cocking back his fist like the spring in a pinball machine. "If you want to go this weekend, you gotta stop making waves," Dan placed the fork down on the table beside a plate. He didn't understand why his brother was always doing that, throwing everyone under the bus and still expecting them to cover for him. It seemed impulsive, like his brain-to-mouth filter never really developed, not even a little bit.

Pa took his usual seat at the head of the table as the boys finished setting out the napkins. Everyone else followed suit, sitting down in their usual places: the boys to Pa's right, the girls to his left, and Ma at the foot. The steaming dishes were passed around while Pa cut sections of kielbasa, scraping them onto everyone's plate. The

cabbage was placed in front of Sandy, who scrunched her nose at the scent, turning her face away so Pa couldn't see, a bit of red lipstick stuck on a crooked front tooth. Ma plopped a generous spoonful onto Sandy's plate.

Dave shoved a whole potato in his mouth. "So," he chewed with his mouth open, "Dan and I were thinking about going camping this weekend..." he started.

Pa chuckled. "Oh really?" He decided to see how far along they got in their plan for the weekend. Humoring everyone at the table.

"Yeah, we're gonna take the bus up to Arrow Park," Dave spoke confidently.

"It's only a five mile walk from the station," Dan added, shrugging nonchalantly. Ma's eyes narrowed. "It's like walking to the Old Stone House and back, Ma."

Ma pressed her lips together, silently chewing a cut of kielbasa. Sandy was barely allowed to ride her bike to Wetson's when she was that age. And that was just on the other side of the neighborhood. "We're going up in a few weeks," she looked back and forth at the twins, but mostly at Dave because he was the one with the thicker skull, "can't you just wait 'til then?"

"We wanted to go up by ourselves," Dave's voice was nearly whining.

"Listen, you shitbirds, Ma couldn't even send you to the garden to pick some cucumbers without one of you coming back with a split mouth and both of you covered in blood. Remember that?" Pa put down his fork.

"That was forever ago," Dave tried to play it off.

"That was only a couple summers ago," Sandy chimed in. Dave glared at her.

"Whadd'ya think is gonna happen when Ma isn't there to patch you up?" Pa

asked. "And remember last summer? When you nearly shot Mrs. Medvedeva?"

"What if we get cousin Pauly to come with us?" That seemed to burst out of Dave's mouth. His brother surveyed the idea.

"He told us the Academy taught him how to patch up a bullet hole on someone. I'm sure he knows how to put on a bandage if anything happens," Dan added on with a nod. Honestly, that was one of his brother's more logical outbursts. They didn't come often. Usually, anything he blurted out like that made whatever they were asking an automatic 'no'.

"You know, I think I might go to nursing school," Elaine chimed in, as if it was fully relevant. It looked fun enough: fine-looking doctors and the little uniform hats, also the validation that would come from people needing her.

Sandy looked up from separating the cabbage on her plate from the potatoes so they weren't touching. She laughed, "you passed out when Dan came in covered in blood last summer." She continued separating. "And what happened to that whole charm school thing? How'd that work out for ya?" She knew full well how that turned out. Elaine kicked her under the table. "What was the reason you quit being a candy striper again? Was it really that you 'just couldn't walk around looking like a human candy cane anymore'?" She looked up from the valley she created on her plate, "Or was it because your puke splattered not only on the patient, but on the Doc's coat too?" She was still bitter at the idea of staying at home while her sister and cousin were having a ball with every other teenager on the planet.

Pa ignored Sandy's comments. He had walked in on a whole crime scene that day they were sent out to pick some tomatoes for dinner: both boys covered in

blood, Elaine passed out on the couch, her limp body hanging off of it, Sandy placing a cold towel on her sister's forehead. "How does your report card look?" He raised an eyebrow.

"They said they'd send them in the mail this year," Elaine responded rapidly. The kids all looked around the table at each other, knowing full well they'd been handed out today during homeroom. And since Elaine had just finished senior year, she should've gotten her diploma too. Everyone at the table seemed to hold their breath.

"But wait, what if Pauly comes with us?" Dave practically hopped out of his chair once he remembered that Ma and Pa hadn't acknowledged his seemingly foolproof idea.

"No," both parents said, nearly in unison.

"Tush on the chair," Ma added, pointing her fork with a slice of kielbasa speared on the end of it at Dave. The table went silent aside from the scrape of metal on ceramic.

Sandy looked up and made eye contact with Dan, who was just cutting into his first piece of kielbasa. She gestured down toward her cabbage and mouthed 't w e n t y - f i v e c e n t s'. Dan contemplated her offer for a moment and nodded his head in agreement. He could get a slice of pizza and a coke from Sal's for that much. Dan smeared some grease across his chin and dropped his fork against his plate with a loud clang. Everyone looked at him. Sandy palmed most of her cabbage. "I'll go grab him some more napkins," she shot out of her chair and disappeared into the hallway.

Sandy placed her hand on the doorknob of the bedroom she shared with



Elaine for a split second before, turning and walking into the room across the hall. She dove under one of the twin-sized beds, pushing aside the dark blue sheets cascading off of the mattress onto the floor. She flipped the lid off of a shoebox filled with Slim Jim wrappers, a couple fishing hooks, a folding knife from Germany that Didu gave Dan for his birthday- Dave made a scene about it because Didu gave him something different- and a sock full of coins. She grabbed a quarter and shoved the box back under the bed, sprinting toward the kitchen for a handful of napkins before returning to the table. She dropped the wad in front of Dan before sitting back down, one leg folded under her butt.

Dan pulled the wad into his lap, unraveling it and sliding the quarter into his pocket. He quickly dumped the cabbage onto his plate and wiped the grease off his face. Dan stabbed a chunk of kielbasa and popped it in his mouth. His face contorted almost immediately, chewing slowly with his mouth open, "Ma, this doesn't taste right." She barely had the chance to look up from her plate before Pa slammed his hand down on the table.

"Elaine, yours taste good?" Dan spit it out into the greasy cabbage napkin.

"Yeah," Elaine responded.

"Dave, what about yours?" Pa's face reddened.

"Yep, good," Dave nodded.

"Pa," Dan looked down at his place, daring to mutter a phrase that could destroy any hope of going camping; "I really can't eat this."

Pa nearly exploded, jumping out of his chair so fast that it flipped over. He stabbed his fork through the kielbasa so hard it could've cracked the plate. He took a

barbaric bite of the sausage and raised his hand, winding up for a good shot. Dan didn't flinch. Pa abruptly stopped chewing, jaw hanging slack as if he just bit his tongue. He spit the kielbasa into his hand.

"Holy shit, it's bad!"

August 1969

*Old Tomatoes*

I sat with my feet up on the dashboard of Rick's truck-- it wasn't even his. It was his brother's, but he was deployed in Vietnam, so it was pretty much Rick's now since the Army didn't want him. Rebecca and Kenny were cackling in the bed behind me, probably talking about one of the kids she babysits. I was buzzing. It felt like there were tiny bubbles just under my skin, anxiety and excitement fizzing to the surface with nowhere to go. Then I opened my mouth and it flooded out.

"Did you hear that Max gave Colleen a promise ring right after graduation?"

What an absolute dream! Rick jammed on the breaks. There was a thud on the glass behind me and my heart felt like it dropped down to my stomach. Rick reached out to adjust his mirror and saw Kenny flipping him the bird from the back of the truck. They joked around like that all the time, but I didn't really understand it. My face got all hot and I started tugging at the hem of my corduroy skirt, the one Pa always said was too short so I wasn't allowed to wear it outside the house. I thought I messed up big time; he was going to kick me out of the truck. Rick stared out straight ahead of him and shook his head a little. I was sure I'd have to hitchhike back to Brooklyn from here, or maybe it'd be better if I just hid out in Sophie's apartment in the West Village. But I looked up and saw the stretch of stopped cars that was way worse than Fifth Avenue during Christmas time. I felt the truck shake as half a dozen kids hopped into the truck bed, yipping and cheering, long hair sticking to their skin in the blazing August heat.

"It's not gonna mean a thing in a month," Rick chuckled, his truck creeping forward. He seemed pretty confident about that, probably since his parents fought all the time for as long as he could remember. And not like mine did. Ma and Pa's shouting matches were nothing compared to his parents'. It was definitely that little curl at the corner of his mouth when he talked that got me. Got me every time. "I don't believe in that stuff anyhow." My heart, already sitting in the pit of my stomach, felt like it turned to cement. I shrugged and tried to play it off cool. I didn't want to seem desperate or anything. I swear that at any moment my heart could push me down through the seat onto hot asphalt.

In front of us, people jumped off of the side runners they had been clinging to for probably miles and started walking up Route 17. Rick pulled the parking break and cut the engine, getting out of the truck in one swoop. I took my feet off the dashboard and just kind of sat there for a minute. Were we done? Just like that? Leaving me in the passenger seat of his truck, stranding me in the middle of the highway surrounded by abandoned cars? At this point, the drivers in front of us were starting to get out of their cars, grab their stuff out of the trunk, and walk. People flowed between cars, their guitar cases and tent poles scraping against the paint as they passed.

Knuckles rapping on metal echoed through the cab. Rick stood at my window, unlit cigarette dangling from his lips, holding my duffle bag up on his shoulder like how Ma carries a sack of potatoes. If she ever caught me smoking, I might as well run away and join the circus. She'd never let me back in the house again. He motioned for me to get out.

"Where's your bag," I asked. Ma always carried two sacks instead of one because she said it was easier. I never understood that.

"Don't need one," he shrugged. "Got a match?" I slid out of the truck and fumbled around in the purse I borrowed from Sandy for the weekend. A guy with a bunch of tattoos came up with a match before me. Rick clapped him on the shoulder. The guy smiled and kept walking, wandering off toward heavy, dark clouds that began to roll in overhead.

"I thought you were bringing a tent or something," I asked as he handed me my bag.

"What's better than looking up at the stars at night?" he had that smile again. He and his brother used to go camping all the time, so I trusted him. I guess it sounded nice, stars and a warm summer breeze. Kinda romantic. I imagined what Sandy's face would've been like if she had come with us. I'm kinda glad she didn't, even though I lost three weeks of allowance to her so she'd watch the twins while Ma and Pa were up at Arrow for the weekend. She would've made Rick drive us straight home if she had to sleep on the ground. She can barely stand the bugs in the bungalow at Arrow Park, let alone sleeping outside. Sophie was probably all set up already. A bunch of her friends from the *poetry group* had rented a bus and drove up early yesterday morning. They were supposed to be meeting up with us at some point today, so neither of us would *really* be lying to our parents. Rebecca was in on the plan too. Her parents wouldn't have let her come if Sophie wasn't here.

The hitchhikers hopped down from the back once they realized we weren't getting very far and brushed past us with one of those portable cassette players.

Rebecca and Kenny followed close behind them, calling out for us to keep up. Ever since prom, they never seemed to be more than five steps away from each other. Rick grabbed my hand and trotted along after them. The walk took so long that my sandals started giving me blisters on my pinky toes. I had to take them off and tuck them under my arm.

The lot of us took a seat in the grass in front of a couple of nuns in habits. I sat up straight and smiled at them just in case, pulling my shawl back up over my shoulders like they always made me do in class. A guy zigzagged through the clusters of people with a guitar case yelling 'Reds!' 'Reds!' Cincinnati hadn't won anything since before I was born and I only knew that because of that kid that came into the deli for a pack of baseball cards every Monday on his way home from school and cussed once when he got a Reds player. I thought Ma was going to backhand him for that. I couldn't imagine why anyone here would be that excited about sports. They didn't look like the type.

Kenny waved him over and asked for a lid of Mary Jane. The guy said he only had half, but he'd throw in some reds and a couple buttons to make up for it. He laid his guitar case down on the ground and opened it. I glanced over at the nuns who were mingling with some guys in leather jackets. Rick propped himself up on his elbows and tossed some cash into the case; Kenny dropped a few dollars in there too. The guy filled Kenny's hands and went on his way, disappearing into the crowd. He started passing stuff around. I ended up with what looked like a few old, shriveled tomatoes that had been hiding behind the crates for about a year. I made Sandy eat one of those once when we were little when we were helping Ma stock the

shelves at the deli. Rick told me to chew them and wash it down with some beer. They tasted just as bad as they looked; I'm not even going to pretend that they didn't taste like dirt. The pocket under my tongue started to flood with saliva and my skin got all itchy like it did right before I had to vomit, but I swallowed it so no one would think I was a pansy. I was used to that though. I had to do that every time I walked into the back of the deli when Ma was cutting the meat off the bones. I couldn't stand the sight of all that blood. I got up and walked around behind a tent that would definitely fall apart if someone sneezed too close to it. I put my hands on my knees and hunched over, gagging on the taste of dirt and last night's kapusta. I spit out the bit of beer that came back up before wiping my mouth on the back of my hand. I straightened myself up and pushed my hair out of my face, locking eyes with the oldest nun of the group. I felt like I was back in school about to get my knuckles whacked, but she smiled. That scared me even more, so I looked straight back down at the grass and walked really fast over to sit between Rick and Babs.

"Where'd you get off to?" He looked over at me.

"Oh, I thought I saw someone I knew."

"Don't tell me any of those nasty ladies from Saint Anne's is here," he was serious only for a split second before a little chuckle escaped from his lips. "Don't want a do over of prom," he swung his hands up and down between Rebecca and Kenny. They leaned away from each other and Rick grabbed Kenny's ear, tugging him until he tipped over. He mimicked the nun's nasally nagging voice complete with a wagging finger, "That's it, Mr. Soldano. I warned you twice already. No canoodling!" The two of them howled with laughter. Rebecca wasn't laughing

though because Kenny ruined her night by getting kicked out of the gymnasium. Ma and Mrs. Rosenfeld had worked for weeks to make her dress and it was really something special! It was a shame she didn't get to show it off 'till the end of the night.

I started to feel the bubbles under my skin again, crackling like when Sandy and I put Fizzies tablets right on our tongues. I squeezed my eyes closed real tight and laid back on the ground. The first few drops of rain hit my face. When I opened my eyes an orange light glowed above me. I was mesmerized. It faded to white and then became yellow. The grass licked the back of my neck and arms. I imagined a million tiny green tongues. I closed my eyes and let their saliva soak through my clothes.

*There's a cross for you to bear*

*Things to go through if you're going anywhere*

I was barefoot dancing on top of something, a school bus maybe. My shawl was wrapped around my waist, soaking wet and my corduroy skirt sagged around my hips. My cotton shirt clung to my skin and my hair whipped around my face. The air was dark around me, but not heavy. For a moment, all I could see was a triangle, blue and gold, and the words *Que Vive* flash on the back of my eyelids. When I opened my eyes again, I felt like I was ten feet tall, a giant looking down at a colony of ants. I twirled, careful not to step on any of them. The spots of light flashed around me as I spun, vibrant against the evening sky. Looking into my own eyes, I



reached out and grasped a hand, pulling a body close against mine. Our shirts clung together at the stomach, making a slurping sound as we peeled away.

*There's a permanent crease in your right and wrong*

*There's a midget standing tall*

*And the giant beside him about to fall*

I lay on my sleeping bag, which was soaked all the way through, looking up at the stars in a haze as they danced on a pitch-black sky. I smacked my tongue against the roof of my mouth. It felt like I ate the sun and sand crunched between my teeth. I was paralyzed by the thought that I may have eaten the whole earth. The dampness beneath me faded away and for a moment I was floating in a void, in space because since I ate the planet-- that meant I had become the earth. I rubbed my eyes and I could see the whole universe on my skin, but it was looking down at me. What if I'm actually a speck in someone's eye that is living in another, wider, universe?

"What?" I jumped, and then rolled onto my side. Rick was lying on his back next to me, all stretched out with his head resting on his crisscrossed arms. "What did you just say?" He rolled over to face me and I didn't say a word. I couldn't. If I opened my mouth, I was afraid all the sand would spill out of it.

*They will try to make you crawl*

*And they know what you're saying makes sense and all*

I woke up curled in a mud-crust blanket in the bed of Rick's truck as we pulled up in front of my house. Rebecca was lying beside me looking up at the sky in a daze. I pulled my duffle bag closer and unzipped it to find an empty can of green paint, a shoelace, and a shirt that wasn't mine. My sandals were nowhere to be found and my shawl had a giant tear in it.

*Don't you know that you are free*

*Well at least in your mind if you want to be*

"Elaine!" Pa's voice made me jump up. I saw him and Ma standing at the front door, Ma holding my note that I left on the kitchen table in her hand. Rebecca's whole body clenched as she pulled the crusty blanket up over her head.

"Now!" I practically flung myself out of the back of Rick's truck. A wave of nausea rolled over me as I regained my balance. I felt my cheeks get all red and once again my heart clunked against my organs so hard it could've slipped right out of my body. I clutched my bag to my chest, dragging my feet as I walked up to the front porch. As soon as I was within arms reach, Pa grabbed my arm real tight and dragged me into the house. Before I even had a chance to turn around, I felt the ping of finger bones against the back of my head.

The sound of leather slipping through belt loops must've echoed through the house because Sandy got up from the couch, disappearing into the hallway and I heard the twins' bedroom door click closed. I felt the sting against my hip first; a strong hand gripped my shoulder and spun me around. My eyes locked with Pa's.

His face was beet red and I could see the vein on his forehead pulsing. As if Sandy and the boys running for cover wasn't enough of a warning sign. The belt caught my thigh next. I pulled my arms up to cover my face, the welt throbbing with heat. I didn't even have time to cry before I heard the next crack of leather on my skin. "I'm sorry!" I pleaded, voice cracking as a flash caught my bottom.

"Boris, Boris, please," Ma stepped in, holding her hand up to catch the belt. She gripped it so tight that her knuckles went white. "Boris!" I could've sworn she made the house tremble that time cause I heard the 'good dishes' that we only used on holidays shake in the cabinet. Everything got quiet for a minute. That was just as scary as the nun's smile because you didn't know what was coming next. Ma's calloused hands pulled my arms away from my face. She was standing between me and Pa, crouched down just enough so she was looking me right in the eyes. Her lips pulled tight over her gums, "get your be-hind in the kitchen and sit," she practically snarled at me. I did as I was told without skipping a beat, sitting down in my chair at the table. Pa sat at the head, but he turned his chair so it faced me directly, and Ma sat across from me in Dave's chair.

Ma slapped the note I left down on the table and that's when the tears started pouring out; I couldn't hold them back any longer. Pa shot up from his seat and leaned over, ready to lay one across me again, but Ma put her hand on his arm and pushed him back down into the chair. He didn't even have to say anything, but I knew what would have shot out of his mouth. First, *Dziubanovski's can't lie* and second, *and they don't cry either*. "You're seventeen, for God's sake, Elaine! Seventeen!" He sat down and scooted his chair really close to mine. The sound of the

wooden legs scraping along the linoleum ripped through my whole brain.

“You left the boys home alone. For three days,” Pa’s voice alone could’ve knocked me off my chair.

“I thought they’d be okay. Sandy was here,” my voice was small.

“Speak up!” he barked.

I took a deep breath, “I thought Sandy could watch them.”

“She just turned fourteen!”

I tried to focus my eyes on anything that wasn’t Pa’s forehead vein.

“Look at me!” He leaned in real close to my face. I could feel the heat radiating off of him.

Ma’s voice made Pa lean back. “You disappeared for three days and didn’t think to ask us? What’s wrong with you? You could’ve gotten hurt and we wouldn’t have even known.”

“I was with Sophie and Rebecca--”

“I saw that Lynch boy driving, and that other guy. I’m gonna tell Ralph that you two were out doing God only knows what this weekend! *Kupa Hivna...*” He shook his head.

I knew saying anything would just make everything worse so I just wiped my tears from my cheek, catching a glimpse of the raised, red welt clearly defined across my outer thigh. Pa massaged his forehead with the tips of his fingers and leaned his elbow on the table.

“Get out of my face. I hope you don’t have any plans for a while, because you’re not allowed out of your room until I say you are.”

“We’ll talk about this in the morning. Pa and I need to discuss what to do with you,” Ma’s voice soothed the sting.

“We’re giving your new cassette player to the church. I’m sure all those kids would appreciate your Beatles collection,” Pa blurted it out just as I was getting up.

The tears started welling up again, threatening to overflow as I left the kitchen. I flicked the light on in my room and sat down on my bed. My stomach grumbled and my mouth still tasted like I ate dirt. Sandy was faking being asleep, laying there looking like a lump under her blanket. The lamp next to her bed wasn’t on and she never went to sleep without it. A second later she rolled over and looked at me before sliding out of her bed and onto her knees. She dragged a shoebox out from under her bed and picked a scooter pie up out of it. Instead of flinging it across the room, like she normally would with anything I asked for, she walked it over and dropped it down on my lap without a word. Usually I’d have to drive a bargain to get her to give me anything and she’d haggle it up ‘till she was satisfied. I waited for her price, but she just turned her back, slid the White Album off of the shelf between our beds and sat down on her bed, dropping the cassette into the shoebox. Ma poked her head into my room as I took the first bite of the chocolate and both of us froze up, holding our breaths, as if she couldn’t see us if we stayed super still like you were supposed to do if you came face to face with a bear in the woods. She caught on to the scooter pie and the shoebox at Sandy’s feet, looking between the two of us before clicking off our light and shutting the door. Sandy lunged for the lamp on her nightstand.