Ania

THEIR COURTSHIP BEGAN IN THE SUMMER OF 1936 WHEN SHE WAS seventeen and he was twenty. He worked as a logger, and one evening he came from the woods wearing muddy boots and carrying a basket of common mushrooms he had gathered as a gift for her. His hands were chapped and shy, but he was strong, and though she did not believe him when he promised to take her to America, the idea thrilled her. When winter came Ania and Kazimierz married. Soon after, they left their Polish village in a loud railcar bound for the Baltic coast, then endured endless days in the cramped depths of steerage, and because he had kept his promise, Ania knew Kazimierz loved her. In that new land, he changed his name to Charlie and found a job in a typewriter factory; he learned English so he could teach her and the child she carried. Ania recited after him—"Hello, how are you?" and "Good-bye!"—and she thought her husband so worthy that she must love him.

Every morning and every evening, in gratitude, Ania prayed. She lit penny candles, crossed herself, and gave thanks—for Charlie who worked one shift at the factory and another at a warehouse, for their new life away from the war just started in Europe, and later for their boy, Teddy. After each "amen," she kissed her fingertips and touched them to the face of the icon from home, a black-and-white picture of the Blessed Mother, the shadow-faced Black Madonna of

Częstochowa. Then Ania would pinch the wicks and slide into bed beside her husband. Some nights, Charlie would caress her forehead and her cheeks with callused hands that smelled of machine oil until she whispered, "No. Sleep now."

Ania kept the picture of the Black Madonna enshrined on a half-moon table in the corner of the bedroom and decorated with ribbons and dried flowers. She dusted the picture and the table every day and sometimes added freshly cut blooms of dandelion or forsythia.

The family attended Mass each Sunday, and it was through the church that Ania met Mrs. Patterson, who had volunteered when the priest announced that a couple from Poland needed help adapting to their new country. Mrs. Patterson, married to a young lawyer, lived in West Hartford on a street where servants used hidden staircases, but she was not much older than Ania, and her casual manner allowed Ania to believe the food, the books, and the spare clothes were gifts, not charity. Mrs. Patterson even hired Ania to clean house, and later arranged for her to work for neighbors until Ania knew every banister, every pane of beveled glass, every marble ashtray on Walbridge Road—knew them so well they bored her. Then, what interested her were the pieces she never cleaned, such as the desk where Mrs. Patterson kept letters, calendars, and newspaper articles. Each time Ania passed the desk, she spied on Mrs. Patterson's life.

And then the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor; the following summer, Mr. Patterson enlisted. His wife threw a farewell picnic party, paying Ania a few dollars to make food and lemonade. On that muggy August afternoon the guests ran out of ice for their drinks, and Mr. Patterson's father at the horseshoe pit was calling, "Can't we get ice in this country anymore?" Ania searched for another block in the kitchen and in the basement, and finding none, looked instead for Mrs. Patterson.

Dance music swung through the halls from a radio upstairs, and though Ania did not then know Benny Goodman, his "Jersey Bounce" would later remind her of that other noise she had heard as she climbed the Pattersons' staircase, a sound obscured by the band's

mellow reeds and snapping brass. Someone crying. No, worse than that. Someone gasping—swallowing whole chunks of grief. Unable to resist, Ania crept to the open door of the bedroom.

On the floor, in sunlight, Mr. Patterson sat holding his wife, her sobs fierce, her fists clenching bunches of his starched uniform, her face pressed against his ribcage. Ania hid, but she could not look away. Something in Mrs. Patterson's grief seemed terrible and pure, something that reminded Ania of only one thing: how on first seeing Teddy, red and squalling, she felt as if she had touched the electric nerve where everything begins and ends, so far from this world it is nearly forgotten.

Ania watched the Pattersons and saw nothing of herself or her husband; this surprised her and made her think of him. She pictured his face—so often surprised, so rarely delighted—and she felt neither the pain nor the love Mrs. Patterson poured into the summer afternoon, but only—and this for the first time—a bloodless pity. Later, after she sneaked away to scrape ketchup from plates, she worried that she had never loved Charlie at all, that she had only agreed to accept his passion because it pleased her, then had mistaken her decision for something more.

The next morning she made pancakes—Charlie's favorite breakfast. She fetched aspirin for his vodka headache and laid a hot cloth on his forehead. When he came home from the factory the following Monday, she unlaced his boots and washed his feet with a soft, warm rag. As days and weeks passed, she worked to be a loving wife, to hide her deceit and atone for it. Nights, after Teddy fell asleep, when Charlie came to her shy and wanting as a teenage boy, she fooled him with false enthusiasm, but that only made him seem a fool. She began to resent him, and though she still made him pancakes, she mixed less sympathy into the batter. She no longer pretended. Wounded and confused, he brought home cut flowers or a pastry from the Italian bakery. Ania could think of nothing to say—there was nothing worth saying—so kept silent, and then Charlie spoke only to Teddy, in English, about baseball and the Yankees, and sometimes when Ania was

in the room Charlie told the boy how fortunate he was to have such a beautiful mother. They lived this way for a few months. Then, in December—a year after Pearl Harbor—Charlie quit his two jobs and enlisted.

When he left for induction, a gunnysack over his shoulder, Ania stood in the doorway of their apartment holding Teddy, who played with her dark curls. Charlie cupped the back of Teddy's head with his hand, whispered in the boy's ear. Then he stepped back off the landing, one foot lowered to the first stair, his face docile and sad.

Because it was her duty as his wife and cruel to do otherwise, Ania kissed him quickly on the lips. He seemed startled, hurt; but then he was downstairs, and then he was gone.

Charlie wrote long letters, addressing them to "Dearest Ania and Teddy" and signing them "With affection and love—Papa." He included in each letter a portion of his pay. Ania answered his letters with long ones of her own, each ponderous with detail and empty of affection. But those letters took so long to write, and there was so little time now that he was gone. She gave whole afternoons to standing in lines for meat or for heating oil, and prices had risen, so she cleaned even more houses on Walbridge Road. Her letters grew shorter by a page, then by two, and then her replies became sporadic. His continued, long and intimate, describing wakeful nights with no word spoken louder than a whisper for fear of drawing fire, and daylong marches through parching heat. In one envelope he included a photograph of himself sitting on a rock beside trees that grew small and twisted. "Show this to Teddy, so I am not a stranger later," he wrote.

He continued to send money. When she spent it, Ania felt dirty, like a thief, and then she hated his money but had no choice. Prices rose every day. Even with Charlie's pay, she could barely make the rent. To save pennies she took thread from old clothes to mend others. She sold her ration cards on the black market for a little extra and that way could afford meat for one meal a week. No one chastised her when she failed to drop a coin in the collection plate at Mass, but the looks of pity from other parishioners embarrassed her. She sat with

Teddy farther and farther toward the back of the church until it became habit to arrive late and leave early, and then they did not go at all.

The first time she prayed to the Black Madonna—Our Lady of Częstochowa, Our Most Chaste Queen of Poland—Ania was seven years old and her own mother had just died from fever. They buried Mama in a cemetery near the river that ran through Królik Polski, their village, and a priest came to say the words over her grave. The next day, Papa and Ania folded the church clothes of the two younger children, stuffed them into sacks, and the family started a walk that would last more days than Ania could count. It was autumn: cold and rainy, and the roads out of the foothills were thick with mud; Papa gave each child a turn on his shoulders. When any of them complained, he would say, "I know you miss her, but soon it will be better." Now and again farmers in horse-drawn wagons offered rides, which Papa would accept, though Ania sat to the back to avoid the drivers who stared at her. "Such a pretty mane," they might say. "What beautiful skin." Those who said nothing frightened her the most.

On clear nights, Papa lit cooking fires and the children slept in tall grass or in piles of hay, limbs tangled, dirty fingers in mouths, warm beneath their *pierzyna,* the goose-feather quilt their mother had made. When there were clouds, the family took shelter in barns damp with manure. Ania often thought about her mother and tried to imagine heaven, which frightened her, because she could only picture constant light and summer heat and all the angels wearing the same white robes.

One afternoon, Ania saw in the distance that the road led to a field with a tower at its center, surrounded by leafless trees. Closer, she marveled at the walls that surrounded the tower—walls as tall as the trees, built from rough gray stones each as large as a cattle trough, and with wooden doors three times Papa's height. The clouds broke, and Ania saw how parts of the tower caught the sudden light and juggled

it. Only that, and she wondered whether she had been wrong about heaven; if it looked like this tower, that would be all right. She imagined her mother waiting inside.

Papa helped them change into their wrinkled church clothes. Then they passed through the tall doors into a garden where priests walked about, then on to another building—a church. A tower bell rang three times.

Inside the church, Ania heard birds and, looking up, saw them sweep across the radiant faces of men painted on the faraway ceiling. Papa made the children hold hands, and they walked deeper into shadows, past things that glowed and things that shined and past big, light-swallowing things. Ania could name none of it: not the drapes or tapestries, not the wooden pews chipped and polished from hundreds of years of use (prettier than the benches in their small church back home), not the mosaics of saints lit by flickering candles—but all of it seemed a gift.

The littlest cried, and Papa lifted him, bouncing him until he was quiet. They joined a line of people waiting to enter a room. A woman chewed at her lips and bobbed, hands clasped, working beads through her fingers; a one-legged man leaned on a stick, his eyes wet, his beard flecked with crumbs; another man clothed in rags scratched his arms and chest, which were covered in bleeding sores. This was no heaven, after all.

Ania left her father's side to peek into that other room, but with a hiss he called her back. When it came their turn to go in, Papa again warned the children to be quiet. Hat in hand, he squatted beside them as they looked upon a woman painted on a board, her right cheek gashed twice so that wood showed behind the paint, her face blackened by smoke from the constellation of candles before her. Around her head shone a circle of light like a crown, and in her lap a boy with a crown like his mother's waved two fingers at Ania. The woman's nose seemed to Ania too long and her mouth too small to eat anything but berries, and she did not smile, so Ania thought the cuts in her cheek

must hurt. Still, the woman's hand beckoned as if there were room in her lap for one more, and Papa touched Ania's back, nudging her forward.

"Children," he said, "Our Lady is your mother now."

Crossing Walbridge Road toward the Pattersons' house through the high torch of a July day, Ania could feel the soles of her shoes stick to the asphalt. Her thighs slapped together under her skirt, and her blouse plastered itself to her back. Teddy's small hand sweated in hers. Inside, Ania shouted "Hello" over the roar of the electric fans, and Mrs. Patterson appeared in the entry hall, a gaunt, talcum-powdered ghost clutching a damp handkerchief at her neck where her dress hung open. In the nearly two years since her husband had left, and she had lost too much weight, as if grief consumed her from within.

"Ania," she sighed. "Nothing special today. No one will visit in this heat, except maybe Ruth Bartlett, and she's not the sort to notice the top of the icebox."

"I have Teddy."

Mrs. Patterson paused as if considering how best to hide her concern. "You know I love Teddy," she said, and she rubbed the boy's head. "Just keep an eye on him, would you?"

In the kitchen, Ania helped Teddy into a chair at the table. "No moving from this seat, Little Monkey," she said. She lifted his hands in front of his face and shook them. "No touching, either."

He pouted, looking so much like his father, and Ania—sorry for Teddy and a little guilty—let go one of his hands and opened the other, tapping the palm with her finger as a sparrow pecks seed from the grass. Then she tugged at the end of each of his fingers as the mama sparrow fed her little ones, saying, "Temu dała, temu dała, temu dała . . ." and then, at the little finger, the bad chick got none, but instead Mama Sparrow snatched off his head—"Temu nic nie dała"—and

flew away, and Ania wiggled her fingers up Teddy's arm to his ticklish neck. He squealed, squeezing her hand between his butter-soft cheek and shoulder.

She swept the entry hall, dusted in the furnace-like heat of the sunroom, and polished the empty space on the buffet where a week before Teddy had broken a vase. Since then, all the Walbridge Road women looked at Teddy with nervous eyes that worried Ania, who could not leave him home, but could not afford to lose any job, either. The landlord had raised the rent again, threatening eviction if Ania did not pay, and everything cost so much . . .

She rested on a footstool near Mrs. Patterson's desk in the study, pulling her skirt's hem high over her knees and taking deep breaths. She leaned near the desk, looking for a magazine to use as a hand fan, but there was none, only a train timetable, a letter from Maine, a blue-penciled note on the calendar: "Junior League @ 7 p.m.—circus tickets to orphans." On the blotter, tied with string, was the stack: two dozen or more, each stiffer than a playing card and printed with the words "Ringling Bros. and Barnum and Bailey Combined Shows (Good afternoon only July 6)." Ania touched them, wondering why Mrs. Patterson hadn't offered tickets to her. She had never seen a circus. Teddy had never seen one, either. But how could she expect anything when Mrs. Patterson had already given clothes and food and money, when Teddy had broken the vase?

Fast as she could, Ania fluffed the study's curtains and retied them, remembering Teddy trapped in the chair. She swept a spider's web from beside a bookcase, then peeked at the circus tickets again, wondering how long she and Teddy could last through the heat and work of summer, heat and work and heat and work and her little boy never to leave his chair. What difference would one day make, one day away? She climbed the servant staircase to change Mrs. Patterson's bed, to shake sheets that billowed weightless as air, to wipe a hot iron over lacy pillowcases.

Then, with chores complete and sweat stinging her eyes, she

sneaked back to the desk, slipped two tickets from the bundle, and hid them in the waistband of her skirt.

Before bedtime, Ania set the circus tickets on her dresser among a clutter of hairpins, buttons, and unread letters from Charlie, then knelt before the Black Madonna. With candle flames undisturbed, with the neighborhood noises of boys roughhousing, screen doors slamming, dogs barking to scare the world, Ania tried to explain why she took the tickets, how she so wanted Teddy to spend a day laughing, his eyes opened to a world beyond his imagining in the way her eyes had been opened the day she and Charlie arrived in America.

"For the sake of the boy," she prayed, "bless my sin."

Teddy appeared then at her door, his cheeks flushed and eyes struggling against sleep not quite broken. "I had a nightmare," he said. He crawled onto the mattress, and Ania blew out the candles. She bunched the sheet at the foot of the bed because it was too stifling even for that, then lay beside her boy. She held him as she would a doll, felt him expand with each whistling breath, and she knew that anything done for him was, yes, for the good.

Though Ania had never seen a circus, a carnival had passed through Królik Polski after each Easter, and the performers sometimes roomed with families. One year, following a difficult winter, Papa rented the children's room to a snake charmer. The man wore a glass-bead necklace and bracelets that rattled, and his skin looked gray as spent ashes. Ania pretended to mind her chores when he was around, but all the while watched him—how he walked with a hop, how he smoothed his eyebrows with fingers dampened by the tip of his tongue—and as she listened to him sing to his serpents in some alien language, something in her grew giddy at his strangeness. When the carnival left the village, he sneaked away, leaving for his room and board only a snakeskin tacked to the wall over Ania's bed. Papa

wanted to burn it, but Ania begged to keep it. That day, and for years after, she would lose herself in the patterns of the skin.

The morning of the circus was hot and damp; the afternoon worse. Teddy led her by the hand along crowded Barbour Street, past vendors selling orange slices, past accordion players, tumblers, and jugglers—Teddy tugging because she never walked fast enough—and finally to the circus grounds, where one enormous tent rose amidst smaller tents and railroad cars. A red-faced man in a lime-colored coat waved people forward, promising "Mysteries, Magic, and Amazement! The Greatest Gathering since the Heavenly Host!" and Ania thought he looked beautiful, and she believed him.

Dizzy with faces and sounds, she pulled Teddy to her and pushed toward the big top, inhaling the musky air, welcoming the jumble of color, amazed at the pictures painted on boards that showed how men could swallow fire, how women could grow beards, how boys Teddy's age could live joined at the hip. Teddy pointed at a clown—"Look!"—and at a pony—"Look!"—and each time Ania looked not with her own eyes but with his, sharing his awe.

At the big-top entrance, while she and Teddy waited to show their tickets, Ania noticed a clown, sitting away from the crowd on a trunk, nearly hidden by a fold in the tent. The clown had placed his hat and a frizzy yellow wig in his lap, and he cupped a cigarette in his hand, pinching it between his forefinger and thumb, its long ash drooping. Elbows on knees, he patted his brow with a handkerchief, then looked at the damp spot on the cloth. Ania thought of Charlie home from work, in his rocking chair, his hat on the table beside it, forehead pink where the hatband had pressed.

The clown raised his face, noticed her. Past the painted grin, past the white face that ended at his thin hair, Ania saw in his eyes the same look Charlie had brought home from the factory each evening, the same vacant weariness she saw in the mirror after a day spent on Walbridge Road. A line of sweat slid the length of the clown's cheek, and Ania recalled soiled bathrooms in expensive houses and fine dust settled on crystal bowls. The circus music became noise. The air stank

with animal droppings. She offered her tickets to a man who tore them, mumbling, “Grandstand, ma’am.”

Teddy begged for peanuts, so they stopped at a vendor who scooped a bagful from a barrel drum that spun over a coal fire. Then Teddy led Ania to folding chairs near the top of the crowded grandstand, so high they could almost touch the sagging canvas above. She held Teddy’s hand, warm as a biscuit from the oven, then wrapped her arms around him. He felt so small, so easy to surround and swallow into her body. She rested her chin on the delicate bone of his shoulder so they touched cheek to soft cheek, and she smelled the tang of his skin.

A man wearing a red coat and a black stovepipe hat leapt into the center ring. “Ladies and Gentlemen!” he yelled into a megaphone. “Children of all ages! Welcome to the big top! Welcome to the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Circus!”

A brass band played a rump-de-diddly fanfare while horses, clowns, and dogs filled the rings. Ania’s hands fell lightly on Teddy’s shoulders and she watched, surprised, as the light in his face disappeared, replaced by fear. It seemed too much for him, all at once.

Then the rings emptied—animals scampering back to their cages, clowns disappearing in folds of the tent—and trapeze artists appeared on platforms high above the rings. Teddy turned in her lap to hide his face in her side. Ania recognized a song the band played: “Stars and Stripes Forever.”

At that moment, a flash of orange appeared on the other side of the big top, then rose up the wall of the tent. Ania thought it must be part of the performance, it seemed such a miraculous thing. But the crowd fell quiet, and then a thunder rumbled from all around and someone yelled “Fire!” and the thunder exploded, flames charging up and across the billowing roof of the tent, people rushing from the bleachers, knocking chairs underfoot. A trapeze artist jumped from his platform, and Ania watched him twist through air to the sudden ground. She grabbed Teddy and chased the crowd, but at the bottom of the bleachers her foot twisted in a chair and she fell, her face scraping

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dirt, Teddy tumbling beneath her. Someone stepped on her; her ribs cracked, her breath shot away. "Mama!" Teddy cried, but heat struck the back of Ania's neck and she curled into a ball, screaming in answer to the screams in her ears, kicking her legs as people trampled them. "Let me up!" she shouted as she sucked and coughed black smoke. The heat wrapped round her, wave after wave sinking deeper until it was underneath her skin and invading her muscles and bone. She managed to stand, but with knifing pain her legs gave way and she fell again. Teddy, in a tantrum, his distorted face unfamiliar through soot and fear, slapped at the ground now strewn with peanuts from the empty bag he yet gripped with a tiny fist. Overhead, flames crept from the blackness like sluggish lightning. Fire rained as a flap of the tent collapsed, swatches of fiery canvas falling on the scrambling crowd and the panicked animals snarling and chattering in cages. A tent pole crashed near Ania, and flaming ropes lashed her face and legs. She beat her arms against her burning skirt as a boy tumbled past, his shirt gone except the buttoned cuffs, the skin of his arms and chest turned black and puddled, and Ania reached for him, but the boy was too fast. And now even the ground burned, and bodies red and black writhed among the fractured chairs. "Mother!" Ania wailed to heaven, praying and cursing in two languages, defying everything, "Mother!" She wrapped her arms around Teddy and, though the muscles of her legs ripped with each step, she limped first one way and then another, forward then back, the heat so massive she couldn't breathe, her arms tingling as hair evaporated and skin blistered, a stink in the air worse than any she had known.

And then she stopped. She stopped.

Above her in the flames she saw a haloed face, shimmering through the smoke, and Ania squinted against the ash dust in her eyes to see more clearly the two scars, the placid mouth, the wide-set and beatific eyes of the Black Madonna. Teddy wailed, but she heard him only at a great distance, his noise baffled by another sound that glided through her—a rising, resonating chime. Ania closed her eyes, touched her dry tongue to her lips. When she looked again through tears, all her

panic disappeared, and in its place Ania felt overcome by an exhilarating serenity, and she stepped toward the face, forward into the flames, reaching out to the hellish sky.

Ania floated in warmth as if in a pond of summer water, or maybe in the air, her heart marking a gentle rhythm as she breathed the sweetness of wildflowers, and then it was gone, only a memory of pleasure that receded as if the thing remembered never was. In its place, Ania had the sense that patches of her skin were peeled away, raw and naked and hot, and thirst emptied her throat of anything but the need for water. She gasped, and the air she breathed seemed barely enough, but each breath—no matter how slight—racked her from bone to flesh. Her heart raced. From all sides she heard groans and shrieks and shouts, and she smelled an odor like rotting bark and then the stench of something burned, and she knew that stench came from her.

She cried Teddy's name.

A masked nurse with gloved hands forced her back down on the hospital bed. Half of Ania's face hurt beyond screaming, and her right hand did, too, and her legs throbbed, and she shivered but could think only about Teddy and the fire and his face marked with ash and smoke and clean lines where tears had washed the skin. Where was her boy? Was he all right? Was he alive?

How long this lasted she never could recall. In years to come, she remembered only her fear, a commotion, hands everywhere, faces masked except for their frightened eyes, voices shouting, everything white and shiny, and she remembered, too, a need to have Teddy curled beside her, and then a whisper at her ear that Teddy was alive and that a doctor would explain everything. After that, only the pain bothered her.

But all that day, no doctor spoke of Teddy. Though she pleaded to see him, the nurses said no, she couldn't leave her bed and nei-

ther could he. When a nurse came to cut and peel and scrub away the dead skin around her face and on her hand, Ania asked again. She whimpered his name even as the skin came away, exposing patches of pink nerves that bolted at the touch of air so that other nurses had to hold Ania's kicking legs and flailing arms. A nurse shaved Ania's head, and another smeared cream on Ania's face, then covered her right eye with bandages. A few hours later, when those bandages came off, Ania screamed curses in Polish and in English because her deep, dead skin came off with them.

When the nurses and doctors left her alone to rest, when the pain, though never gone, rested too, she worked to understand the pleasure she had felt, the singing joy of body and soul that began in the fury of the tent when she had looked up and seen the scarred, sooted face of her Blessed Mother. But she could recall only a dim picture, and the sensations remained impossible to re-create. She remembered stumbling forward—Teddy in her arms—toward that face, toward the fire, too. Others had passed her, hurrying the other way, but she headed deeper into the tent, past empty cages and burning chairs and an upended peanut cart. Now, amidst other patients who cried and moaned, the cruelty of the tent seemed the thing most real, and she wondered whether she had been delivered or betrayed.

"Ania?" Mrs. Patterson said, and Ania awoke, ending a dream of Mass in the small church back home; Father Petrykowski's face had been painted like a clown's, and he had refused her the Host, holding a lit candle to her lips instead.

Mrs. Patterson wore a surgical mask, and her hands were gloved; a moment passed before Ania recognized the eyes, before she realized they belonged not to a nurse come to cause pain but to someone else. For the first time in days Ania felt relief, but that lasted no longer than a breath, because she remembered her theft and what had come of it.

"Don't cry, Ania. Everything's all right now."

Ania listened to that early-morning voice full of promise and light, and she wanted to confess to her, relieve the guilt, but who then would be left to visit her when Mrs. Patterson, betrayed and disgusted, walked away?

"I brought Teddy into the fire." Ania's voice broke, and she clutched the collar of her paper-thin gown. "The nurses still won't let me see him. Bacteria, they say. He's my son, I say. But they're hard-hearted."

"Oh, I know. The weeks can seem forever, but you'll see him soon. I know you will."

With a finger from her good hand Ania traced circles on the bed-sheet, the circles becoming an oval, the oval becoming a face, and Ania added two straight lines as scars. "Teddy and I, we send messages through a priest," Ania said. "He writes them for us, carries them back and forth."

"I'll visit Teddy, too. I'll tell him that you miss him." Mrs. Patterson pointed at the burn on Ania's face. "That looks like it's healing," she said. "Here. I brought some things from your apartment. Clothes for when you leave, some mail. There's a cablegram from Charlie." She held up an envelope.

Ania shivered. "Will you take off your mask?" she said. "I have to see a face."

"They told me not to," Mrs. Patterson said, but then she reached behind her head and unknotted the strings. The mask fell around her neck, and with obvious effort Mrs. Patterson smiled, her lips daubed rose, a copper shadow over her eyes and rouge on her cheeks, her brown hair rolled into a bun that leaned down the back of her neck. It seemed to Ania a perfect face, a face Mr. Patterson must miss.

"Shall I read the cable from Charlie? I can leave it for you to open later."

He would blame her. Ania imagined words of anger and accusation, how she had hurt him. Though afraid, she said, "Please."

Mrs. Patterson tugged the envelope open and unfolded the tissue-thin paper. "Good news," she said. "The army's granted him emergency leave. He's coming home."

He walked in on Sunday afternoon a week later, dressed in a starched uniform, a khaki-colored necktie tucked inside his shirt above the chest button, a double-stripe chevron on each sleeve. His hair was trimmed short, and he wore a surgical mask. One gloved hand held his cap, folded flat; in the other he carried a box wrapped in silver paper and red ribbon. When he sat beside her, he set the box on the floor and reached toward her elbow.

"The nurses say no," she said.

He pulled his hand away. His eyes softened as if distressed by how she had changed, and it was only then she knew how badly her face must be burned. The nurses, the doctors, the priest—none had brought her a mirror.

"I wish I had been there," he said, and she heard in his voice that he relived the fire, too, imagined her there, her and Teddy, and she felt embarrassed by his weakness: She deserved scorn, not sympathy. Ania turned her face away. Three beds down, a doctor and nurses worked on another survivor whose moans sometimes rose into screams.

"They wouldn't let me bring flowers," he said. She heard him unwrap the package, the tape snapping, the paper crumpling. "It's a picture," he said.

She looked and saw the three of them together: Teddy, an infant in his christening gown, on her lap; Charlie with his arm around the back of her chair. Ania had insisted on sending a print to her father in Poland, though Charlie told her the Germans controlled everything and would never deliver it. Charlie, always so practical.

He set the happy family on her bedside.

She knew why he had brought the portrait, and she feared a reunion would create a household even worse than what they had shared before; it was worse now for his kindness. More than ever, she wanted the flames and the punishment, wanted the heat to burn away her shame, her guilt, her remorse, leave all of it ashes and her, too, if purging the rest required it. Perhaps she was meant for the fire; per-

haps that had been why Our Lady appeared in the smoke. *She* was a mother, after all, and didn't all mothers understand that miracles—even the forgiveness of Ania's sins—required pain and suffering? Ania had escaped the fire too soon. A mistake. For if she had remained in the presence of the Black Madonna, all that was wrong and sinful would have been engulfed, purified, erased in the passion, and Ania would lie now in her hospital bed bathed in grace.

"You can't come home," she said to Charlie. "You left. You left."

His face—the parts she could see—changed: the eyes widened, the ears reddened. "You can't come home," she said again. "And you can't have Teddy. You can't . . ."

When Charlie walked out, he took the photograph.

On the day Ania left the hospital, the nurses gave her permission to visit Teddy. They made her wear a white gown over her clothes, as if she were still a patient, and a white mask over her face. She changed in a lavatory. A month had passed since the fire, and for the first time she saw her scar, the skin raised in a purple patch over the right half of her forehead, along her scalp, covering her right eye, ending in a line that ran across her cheekbone to her ear. With her good hand, she touched the rubbery new flesh that intrigued and horrified her. To cover her shaved head, Ania tied a brilliant blue scarf the nurses gave her as a farewell.

He lay with other boys in a room made for them, the walls painted blue and all the beds small. Teddy's bed, with bars around it, made Ania think of the cages around the circus rings. But wires and tubes snaked into this cage, and in the midst of it her baby lay swaddled in white sheets.

A nurse lowered the bars on one side, and Ania sat in a chair beside the bed. Looking at Teddy frightened her, even more because he was asleep. Wrapped in gauze, forehead sweaty and head shaved bald—Teddy looked less like her boy than some mistake the doctors

made while building a child from scratch. Tubes ran to his foot and his groin. The skin on his face, the only skin that had been spared, had lost its softness. His arms and legs were tied with cloth strips to the bars, so he was spread like a bird over the sheets.

"He'll scratch his burns," the nurse said. "Even with his toes if he can reach. If he does that, the grafts might not take, or the infections might get worse."

Ania asked to touch him, but the nurse shook her head.

"Teddy," Ania whispered, "it's Mama."

He opened his eyes, but she could tell he didn't recognize her. Not with the mask.

"I'm hot," he said.

Ania's hands began to shake, and she held them near her mouth. She began to feel hot, too, breathing into the cotton mask.

"It's Mama," she repeated. "It's Mama."

A little before six that evening they made her leave him. Outside Teddy's room, Ania took off the mask and gown and adjusted her blouse, one that was a Christmas gift from Charlie a few years back. She thought of that morning, of Charlie's generosity, as she rode the bus home. There, she saw that he had earlier come for his things, stayed a night or two, then left not to return. He had eaten in the kitchen and washed his plate, fork, and knife and set them in the dish rack. She could tell he had slept in their bed, because the sheets were pulled and tucked tighter than she had ever managed. He had taken clothes from the closet and a pillow from the sofa, and her favorite of Teddy's picture books, about a dog that runs away from home. Also, Ania's hairbrush was missing.

The landlord, fearing German bombs, had painted all the building's window glass black. Ania kept the windows shut, living in shadow, listening in anger to the neighborhood's sounds: hide-and-seek, kick the can, stickball; a cat in heat; a fruit peddler calling out "Peaches!" Af-

ternoons, she visited Teddy. Always she took care to leave him before supper because the nurses told her that was when Charlie stopped by, and Ania feared seeing her husband, though she thought of him often. She imagined him in a two-room apartment somewhere in the city, eating bread and cheese for dinner. She remembered the photograph of the christening, his arm around her back, and tried to remember how it felt—his touch. She came to regret the emptiness of the apartment, especially during the silent, wakeful nights when she lay in bed and relived what they had called the greatest show on earth, saw again the smiling, painted faces of the clowns who, armed with water buckets, shouted and waved, forever laughing at the flames.

On a Wednesday afternoon two weeks after Ania left the hospital, she heard a car pull to the curb, then listened to its engine shut down and the parking brake grind. She didn't leave the couch, not even when the hinges on the downstairs door creaked. No voices, but they were women—Ania could hear high heels clicking at the bottom of the stairwell. She reached for her scarf and opened the door before they could knock. The women fluttered at first like chickadees, their long eyelashes batting, their heads twitching this direction then that—except for Mrs. Patterson, who stood near the back looking at the floor as if she had just misplaced an earring.

Mrs. Griswold, Mrs. Mawson, Mrs. Bartlett, Mrs. Thompson—the women from Walbridge Road. The brightness of their summer dresses and of the white beads on their purses lit the hallway so that its wood looked poorer, its floor dustier, its wallpaper dirtier. Mrs. Griswold, at the front, offered Ania her hand, rainbow-colored bracelets bunched at her plump wrist.

"We're oh so sorry," she said.

Ania invited the women in. All passed her quickly and sat—except Mrs. Patterson, who stopped to lay a gentle, cold hand on Ania's elbow, and whose mouth grew smaller with concern until her red lips formed a carnation.

Ania found another chair for Mrs. Patterson, then switched on a lamp. She fetched ashtrays for Mrs. Mawson and Mrs. Griswold,

offered coffee or lemonade and apologized that there was no food. The women assured her that having refreshments for guests should be the last thing on her mind, that it was presumptuous of them, really, to drop in unannounced—and then the women fell silent. They drank and smoked as if they had done something wrong or were witness to something they ought not see. Ania leaned against a radiator near a window, adjusting her robe to cover more, to hide. Their timidity made her nervous.

"Dear," said Mrs. Griswold, "how is your Tommy?"

Mrs. Patterson whispered, "It's Teddy, Katherine."

Ania smiled. He came to her, not as a picture, but as a memory of touch. She could feel him in her arms, his slender hand nesting in hers, his weight in her lap, his body growing breath by breath.

"Some days he is better. Others, he is not."

"Such a dreadful day that was," said Mrs. Thompson. "So many died."

"All those children," said Mrs. Patterson, softly.

"You're fortunate, Ania, you really are," said Mrs. Griswold. "It's a blessing you and Teddy survived."

Ania rubbed her hands together, the left caressing the scar on the right, and tried not to smile. Such a silly woman, Mrs. Griswold. No one in the tent was blessed, except maybe the dead.

When the women declined more lemonade, Ania collected the glasses, each stained with lipstick. "I'll help," Mrs. Patterson said, though Ania had all the glasses in hand. The other women remained behind, not speaking.

In the kitchen, Mrs. Patterson stood next to the sink basin. Her eyes, shadowed blue, shone from her face with such intensity that Ania wanted to look away but couldn't. "There's a check in my pocketbook," Mrs. Patterson said. "It's pay for the month and a half that you've missed, as well as pay for one month more."

"Your homes must need cleaning."

"There's a nice Hungarian woman," Mrs. Patterson said, watching as Ania rinsed the glasses. "She has four boys—older—and all live at

home. She does good work. It will be difficult to let her go. But we've decided—all of us—when you want to come back, Ania, the jobs are yours. Of course."

Ania thanked Mrs. Patterson, then laughed without meaning to, without knowing why, and said, "I stole the circus tickets from your desk."

"Oh, dear, I know!" Mrs. Patterson said, panic in her eyes. "I should have given them to you. There you were, with poor Teddy, in my house, like a member of the family, and I didn't even think to . . . and that night, when I counted the tickets—then I heard about the fire. Oh, Ania, I was so afraid."

Mrs. Patterson tinkered with the clasp on her purse, her hands shaking and the clasp resisting her. She pulled a kerchief from her sleeve and dabbed her eyes, which had been stained by leaking mascara. "If you need a loan—anything, really—of course you can ask me," she said. "Ask me for anything. Oh, I hate this."

When the two left the kitchen, the other women already stood by the door, and on the coffee table sat a small of collection of checks. Mrs. Patterson finally managed the clasp of her purse, pulled out her check, and set it atop the rest. Mrs. Griswold sniffed and touched a kerchief to her nose. Mrs. Thompson stood at the door with her hand on the knob.

Mrs. Patterson looked down before offering a hand to Ania, reaching toward the hand without scars.

"You telephone if you need anything," she said. "Anything at all."

As Ania closed the door on the women, as their automobile choked to life, she remembered Mrs. Patterson's touch, its mercy, its selflessness, its insufficiency. She wandered past Teddy's room, the bedcovers neat, the sheets unchanged for so long; and then to the bedroom where she slept alone, and she paused before the half-moon table, its candles filmed with dust, the icon still beckoning. Ania turned from it, wrapped her arms around herself and squeezed. She felt nothing. But her flesh was healed; her skin longed once more for contact, for sensation, for texture, for a warmth that would not burn.

"An astringent," said Mrs. Patterson, wiping a cotton ball over Ania's face. "I'm not certain what the word means, but it shuts your pores and cleans your skin." Mrs. Patterson pressed hard with the cotton, and Ania's skin stung in some spots and in others lit up as if touched by a breeze.

Ania sat sideways to her bathroom mirror in a stiff wood chair. Mrs. Patterson stood in front of her, now patting Ania's cheek with two warm fingers, spreading a liquid that felt dry and seemed to stretch Ania's skin, touching everywhere but the scar.

"And this is foundation. I almost can't believe nobody's ever done this for you. I suppose that pretty as you"—Mrs. Patterson took a breath—"pretty as you are, I suppose there never was much reason. But we can always . . . well. There's always a first time, and I'm glad you asked. It surprised me, I have to say, to hear from you so soon. But I'm glad."

Ania turned her face to the mirror for a better look.

"Nothing's happening," she said.

"Not yet. We haven't even started your eyes. That's where you'll notice the difference. Tilt your head back." Mrs. Patterson pressed gentle fingertips to Ania's forehead, spread makeup under Ania's eyes "to get rid of this purple that comes out when you're tired. You do look tired, dear."

Her hands floated around Ania's face, passing under her nose with the scent of bar soap, fingers skipping, palms cupping the side of Ania's head as Mrs. Patterson drew lines on the lids of Ania's eyes, whispering as she worked. . . *Smudge here. That's good. Make you Cleopatra. Charlie will like this, I think. Don't move. This might sting. There. Rouge off the cheekbone. Oops. I'll wipe that. Try again. Yes. Open those eyes. Open. Open. Now powder. Smells like roses, doesn't it? Just a touch. There. Takes the shine off. There. There.*

Mrs. Patterson's fingers working on her, working for her, made

gooseflesh of the skin on Ania's arms. Mrs. Patterson's fingers prodding, wiping, dabbing, sweeping, brushing . . .

Her eyes. Facing the mirror, Ania could not stop looking at her own eyes. The rest—her cheekbones, her nose and its bridge, her forehead and chin, her lips—all now subdued by the radiance of her eyes. Even the scar—she remembered the scar and looked at it, but no, Mrs. Patterson made even that less important than the little miracles of her eyes.

"How does it feel?"

"Feel?" said Ania, who had only seen. But now she realized her face felt covered in something inflexible or protective, as if Mrs. Patterson had painted her with some magic salve that could resist even flame.

"It feels hard."

"You'll get used to it." Mrs. Patterson picked through the pouch she'd brought. "Let's not forget the lipstick."

Ania waited in the hospital hallway, watching the boy and his father, neither of whom had yet noticed her. Charlie sat, still in uniform, leaning forward with elbows on knees, rubbing his palms together, telling Teddy about a pitcher with the Yankees, who was Polish. She hesitated at the doorway to listen and to watch, standing unsteadily in high heels borrowed from Mrs. Patterson, fiddling with the buttons of a linen dress that Mrs. Patterson had lent her, too. She studied Charlie's hands, how sometimes he raised them in surrender, or made a fist, and once he snapped his fingers. His hands looked clean and vital, so different than when their creases and lines were drawn with grease from the machines he fixed at the factory. She stepped into the room.

Teddy saw her first. His face changed and his mouth fell open. Noticing that, his father turned. Charlie's face paled.

"Mama," Teddy said, and she could see by his frown, by the fear

in his eyes, that he thought something was wrong, that having both Mama and Papa at his bedside meant something terrible.

"No, Teddy," she said, rushing to him. "Everything's fine, Little Monkey."

"The nurses say not to touch," Charlie said.

But she had waited too long already—more than two months of the longest days. Ania began to tug at Teddy's fingertips. "Temu dała, temu dała . . . " and at the thumb, "Temu nic nie dała," and she ran her fingers up to his chin, and Teddy giggled and twisted away from her and toward her.

She let go and faced Charlie. "The nurses will clean him," she said.

But Charlie seemed already to have forgotten his warning. He gazed at her, and she saw he was startled by how she looked: not shaved or wounded, not bandaged or shamed.

She tilted her head, as if to study the bag dripping clear liquid into Teddy's toe, but really so that Charlie could better see the scars in the midst of the powder and cream and color. "We're waiting for you," she said to Teddy. "Mama and Papa are waiting for you to come home to us. You come home," she said, "to us." And she reached for Charlie's hand. She reached with the hand that had been burned so that he could feel the lines there, the raised skin, the smooth, waxen flesh.

She pulled Charlie's hand to her face, opened his fingers and let his palm fall on her marred cheek. His ears reddened, making his poor complexion even paler, and she watched his eyes as he examined her the way he might look at a broken engine.

Teddy squirmed in his bed. "I don't want to be tied," he complained, but Ania only said, "I'm sorry, Little Monkey. All the rules we can't break."

Charlie pulled his hand away, and she turned to him, suddenly afraid, but he didn't leave. He took her by the shoulders and guided her into his large lap, where he wrapped his arms tight around her. She tensed at first, letting him squeeze, and she thought of herself as a dishrag in his hands, twisted until all the pain and fear drained, and then her body loosened and his grip did, too, but he didn't let go.

He didn't let go. Settled there in the midst of him, the rhythm of her breath matching his, she thought maybe this was love. She hoped so.

At the door of their apartment, she handed Charlie the key. Inside, she patted his rocking chair. "Sit here," she said, then brought him a bottle of beer from the icebox and apologized that there was no vodka.

"There was no vodka overseas, either," he said. "Some bourbon. Mostly beer, though never this cold."

As she cooked dinner she spied on him now and then, but if his gaze turned her way she snapped her attention back to whatever lay before her. Sometimes when she looked up, she caught him looking at her, but he said nothing, and that unnerved her.

Over black bread and pierogi, he asked, "Does it hurt?"

"No," she said. "And the doctors say that after a few years, it will still be purple but not so rough."

"I wish you had written about the money. I always kept a little, but I didn't need it."

"You sent enough." She served him more pierogi. "We survived."

With that last word she flinched; for Teddy the doctors promised nothing. And when she looked across the table at Charlie, who fixed his attention on his plate, she knew he suffered from the same uncertainty.

She washed dishes in the fading light of a late summer sun, handling each plate and each utensil with tenderness, the warm rinse water flowing from the tap without sound, peeling the soap from a plate, then a bowl, then a spoon. Finished, she shook the water from her hands, wiped them in a threadbare towel, then came to him in his chair, leaned over its back, and kissed the lobe of his ear. He stiffened, gripped the arms of the rocking chair so hard that the blue veins rose across the backs of his hands, and she grazed his hand with her fingertips. Tight skin. Callused. Coarse, curled black hair. She dragged

her fingertips to his wrist, then stepped away and into their bedroom. With the light off, she began to undress, beginning with the blue scarf. When she heard him behind her, she said in Polish, "Leave the light off." She was afraid for what he would see of her, the hair nubby and not grown back, the scars that in the bedroom she could not show off to him so proudly as she had in the hospital. Here her disfigurement would mark her as a woman different from the Ania he had known before. She needed to be the same, the Ania he loved, the one for whom he would stay. His shoes clumped to the floor behind her, and she heard his belt unbuckle.

When she turned to face him, the window and its pale light behind her, she saw in his jittering eyes, in the way he bit his lip, let it go, bit it again, that he was fearful, and she realized how much joy she still gave him and, yes, how much he loved her. So she stood straight, raised her arms, and welcomed her husband home, troubled and relieved by how much his happiness depended on her.

His lovemaking was familiar and quick, and she knew he had been faithful. Once finished, he whispered, "I love you, I missed you," hand yet clasped to hers, before he fell asleep. With the thumb of that held hand she rubbed Charlie's skin, the same spot over and over. She had hoped for more, for something electric with mystery, yet now she felt nothing but Charlie's skin and, maybe, some gratitude for his weight in the bed, and then a growing unease that all nights would be like this night, that she would forever feel nothing more than skin and gratitude.

Charlie snored, desperately snatching at gulps of breath. The moon no longer shone through the open window. Clammy in the heat, Ania shifted her legs away from her husband and let go his hand. Through the window she heard a baby cry. The sound scared her, or maybe she had been afraid ever since Charlie stepped into the apartment, hinting at the old, quiet order of things from which so much, still, was missing. But it would have to do, there being nothing else.