D (David)
I know. It sounds ridiculous to say, *forgive me father.*

Weak, overwrought, even hysterical to say, *for I have sinned.*

I lost the voice of my dead dad as it sounded in my head.

So what?

I should be secular by now.

I should grow up. I should be free! I should be unapologetic about whatever uncontrolled developmental journey is happening to me.

It is grief. And, it’s inevitable.

Independence. Self-possession.

Besides, I want to know: what kind of sin is it to say, I cannot hear your voice inside my head?

*Forgive me father* — how dramatic! Begging and confessing when it’s not my fault, when there is no absolution.

But I can’t help it, I am panicking.

I don’t know what to do. Or, how to be. Or, who am I? Or, why, except it feels a sin to say, *I have forgotten the sound of your voice.*

Bless me father, I have fucked up.

That I lost you. That I had you? That I need you, still.

❦
I was nineteen when I suddenly noticed I could not summon what he sounded like.

At first, I meant the concrete sound of him. That tender mix of English, French and Hebrew that sounded elegant and hard to place. He called his accent “Belgian” because he didn’t want the politics or desert heat of being born Israeli. And, anyway, “how many Belgians have you met?” He’d like to joke. “They’re European but no one ever comes from there!” He said, “don’t worry”, when I said I’m worried that you’ll be found out.

I was standing in the dining room of the house my mother bought with her tyrant lover in the summer after my first year of college, realizing I had no one to tell me what I should do.

*Talk to me dad,* I started begging the air.

I knew even then I was being symbolic.

I was twelve when he died. It had been years since we spoke. Who knew when the last time was I recalled his voice correctly.

But, now I heard actual silence where his companionship used to be.

Up until then, his words were a lake that I dipped my feet into when the sun was too hot and my mind couldn’t find the comprehension it needed.

What do I do with the wreck of a boy that I’m raising? The baby brother that I treat as my son – when he again gets suspended for throwing his desk on the floor or looking high in the morning. Do I bargain with him for improvement or take away his electronic toys?

The woman who vies with the boy for parental attention, intervention, banging the furniture of every room she is in, whether she’s happy or sad, spending money we need for the bakery business we’re running, apologizing for not buying groceries or not signing forms on the counter or forgetting not
to sign anything legally binding that I haven’t first read. When my mother does another thing I think will finally sink us, does it make sense to sound judgmental as a self-righteous, smarter daughter would or pretend I am her husband telling her what to do? What will be more effective or effective at all?

Should I major in English literature or politics? Philosophy? Psychology? Every teacher tells me their own field is where I belong, but I find everything interesting and don’t know how one is supposed to freely choose.

Based on his values and the things he said when I was little, I became adept at extrapolating an opinion he might give.

We talked this way for hours, he and I. I lived this way for years.
And then, all of a sudden, one day he was gone.

I am standing in the dining room in this decrepit creaking house they say they bought to fix, with its egg-yolk yellow wallpaper, gaudy golden antique table, and ghastly grand-cushioned chairs. The room is strewn with her old furniture and his, lit by the extravagant chandelier she opened a new credit card account to purchase. I’m thinking, should I go to this prestigious teaching internship in New York City, as planned. Or should I surrender to this overwhelming need I feel to be by myself for the first time and quiet.

So, I ask. Then, I ask again, as if he merely missed his cue. I say, it is your turn to remind me what I ought to do, but nothing comes back but an echo – the instantaneous awareness that no one’s there.
I wear mostly bootcut, shapeless jeans, long-sleeve shirts, and hoodies in those days. I have short curly brown hair, no jewelry but a big silver heart on a necklace my mother gave me when I turned sixteen and fake diamond stud earrings that she says I should wear.

I am wider and fleshier than I should be for my narrow frame. Not overweight in a discernible way, just a generalized unfitness that I hope no one notices but, having been athletic, I know that I feel.

I see food as a logistical burden and every meal I eat makes me ill.

I smile often and widely.

I move briskly, talk quickly, never stand still long enough to seem tired.

There are girls in school who are always cajoling me to go out on the weekends with them. You’re so funny, they tell me and giggle, c’mon. There are boys who feel sure that dating me will make them profound.

College is like being in a baby-proofed house after coming back from three tours in Iraq.

I have four majors, 2 minors, and four jobs, so that no one will ever notice how restless I am.

I don’t want to notice how restless I am.

I smother the shaking with errands and papers.

I am sufficiently enlightened to know that therapy is probably overdue, but also if someone tells me I should worry less and feel things deeply, I’ll explode.

Besides, I’m not an idiot.

I understand what a defense mechanism looks like.

But I’ve only ever heard people talk about letting them go.
As I’m standing in the dining room, repeating I don’t hear you, whispering talk to me dad the way you waken someone who is merely deeply sleeping, I can imagine, for a moment, how this could be a signal of healing as I’ve seen it advertised.

What a sign of maturation to finally renounce my stubborn colloquy with sonic ghosts.

But when the shrinks say this, I think they perceive attachment as something you can modulate freely to accommodate your changing needs, that you can journey from dependence to prideful autonomy by gradually getting to know yourself better.

How heroic the well-mourned adult must seem, putting away lovers, the next step from childish things.
At his funeral, I read a poem I had written called “daddy’s little girl.” I’m twelve and managed to rhyme girl with curl in a way that conveys how desperately I love him.

I cannot reach the microphone and everyone is crying.

I am adorable.

Afterward, people come up to me in a steady stream of pitying faces to tell me how proud my dead dad would be. People cry, pet my head, and say, “our father talked about you always. it wasn’t just because you were his daughter that he was so crazy about you.” They’re telling stories to help themselves feel connected to my pain and it makes me want to comfort and reassure them.

I’ll be okay, I fantasize saying.

Some of these mourners are so visibly heart-stricken I wonder if I should put an arm around their shoulder, say, now, now and gently pet their head. But, this would make plain the way I see them and, besides, I cannot reach them.

I have already checked.

Two years ago, when we moved back to Toronto after two years of his being sick in Boca Raton, he found an Israeli ex-commando with a judo club to teach me how to “defend myself.” Since I would be “a girl growing up by myself in a dangerous world,” he arranged for me to learn some moves from this steely-jawed veteran who was renowned for having trained his unit to kill the enemy without breaking a sweat.

I turned out to be a natural at judo, that art of dancing with and throwing other people. And, I find that as I’m seated in the front pews listening to mourners who are extra dramatic in their performative empathy, I am calculating if I have the necessary angles to bend myself into their torso, lift us back up quickly enough to fly into the air together, and land back down. My right arm still
holds their lapels with them lying beneath me, too winded to keep saying they know how hard it is for me to lose a dad.
They think I lost my favorite person. Because even from afar, it isn’t hard to tell where temperamental affinities align in the kinship arrangement of our family life. The father and daughter are brainy, articulate and social. The mother and son are hyperactive, nonverbal, and difficult to reach.

They are thinking that I lost my playmate. Of the way I could be precocious on command when I was tagging along with him somewhere and he would say, “you’ll never believe the question Gila asked me the other day – she’s only 7! Tell them, Gila.” And I could repeat it all bashfully while he laid his heavy hand on my shoulder, boasted, and beamed.

Maybe you could tell we were a duo: like two Tetris pieces who fell together, sidled up to each other and clicked.

We took long drives together to golf and resort country clubs – long hours out of town for cake deliveries and the schmoozing with chefs he was so fond of.

“Who’s coming with me?” he would say on a Saturday morning, all of us scattered around the bakery business we owned.

He wore faded pale blue jeans, a thick cable knit wool sweater that pilled but could make his middle-age belly look like just another natural feature of the academic life, and a wool hat that he placed on the tip of his head so his curly, unkempt white hair was uncontained. He looked musty in the light grey leather jacket that was too old and small for him to close.

He smelled like moth balls and cheap aftershave and seemed completely unaware of the expanse separating the dashing 20 year old blond and blue-eyed smooth-talker who first bought these clothes and the bloated, bedraggled, uneasy small-business owner he had become.

When we heard him say “who’s coming with me?” we took turns convincing him it was the other person’s turn.
But, when he said, “if neither of you wants to come with your dad, that’s ok, I’ll go alone. Listen guys, I cannot force you.” I ran to him and said, “I would love to go with you dad.” His self-doubt didn’t linger a single moment past the yes he heard and I glared and tried to squint with scorn at D, as I volunteered my hand to join his eager, sweaty palm.

We talked on those drives. Or, he talked and I listened.

I could tell when his logic was faulty or his insistences were weak, but I could see what my questions would do to him and so I stayed quiet while he told me what his dreams had been and ideas were – what he valued, wanted, thought.

Sometimes, he’d interrupt his meditations.

“I talk to you like you’re an adult, okay?”

I would nod approvingly while he searched my face to find what he had put there before returning to the road and going on.

Often, he talked about his childhood. His years in an Israeli Kibbutz, where people participated according to their skills and everyone watched out for each other’s interests. He talked about how loved he’d been, how his handsome Austrian looks were always teased and revered.

“I was allowed to be in the choir on the condition that I promised never to sing! This is how gorgeous I was and how bad my musical ear! Can you believe it, Gila? Imagine a teacher in North America telling a student to show up for performances but promising never to open his mouth. Ah,” he would sigh, shaking his head from side to side vigorously in disbelief and pleasure and slapping his knee with whatever hand was not then on the wheel.

“You can’t imagine it, can you? No, of course not. It was a different time, yes. That was the life though, not like here with everyone living separately, helping and worrying only about themselves.”

“You would love the country, Gila. I don’t know why you’re not growing up there...huh? Did I make a mistake raising the two
of you here? What do you think? But, you see it’s not so simple. You have to understand. What would I do there, for example? I would have to have a designated profession, like one specific place that I went to and worked, like you guys in schools. But, I’m more creative than that, right? I couldn’t just follow orders like the others.

“That’s another good lesson to you, Gila. You have to know yourself!

“This way you don’t have to ever depend on anyone. Except for me and your mother, no one will care about you in a real way. You have to expect this, understand?

“We’re going to die one day and you’ll have to learn how to take care of yourself – and D –, of course. Are you listening? It’s going to be before you know it. Trust me. I lost my mother when I was young, early thirties, not a child, but you have to be ready.

“Are you following? I’m teaching you things you’re going to need for the rest of your life.”
While he drove, his talking shifted seamlessly between gears, exhortative, sometimes, plaintive, wistful, and fierce. The highways were narrow and sparsely populated, local routes to remote golf clubs hours outside of the city. He liked to keep his jacket on, and in the small patch of aisle between us lay his fraying leather gloves and khaki green wool hat. I didn’t know when the driving would come to an end – only that every now and then the truck stopped and my dad would come around to the passenger door, put his hands firmly beneath my armpits, lift me out of the truck, and carry me down to the ground. He would announce the name of the resort we’d arrived at and give me his hand to hold onto. We were the delivery guys, he and I, and this was our route.

“This is my daughter,” he’d say, as soon as we entered the fluorescent kitchens through the back door that said in bold letters “deliveries only.”

It bustled with chefs cutting raw meat into cubes and putting them on metal skewers, assistants prepping potatoes for future roasting, cutting vegetables, loading industrial sized racks with stainless steel trays and zipping them into freezers the size of houses when they were done. When my father would lean down to say, “do you want something to eat? You’re probably hungry,” and I whispered, *French fries*, he got me grilled fish or spaghetti instead. Sometimes one of the men he was busy talking business with noticed I wasn’t eating my food and said, “the kid probably prefers something from the children’s menu instead,” and when I nodded my father said, “yes, but they understand nothing, the kids these days only want to eat junk food.” If the chef didn’t get too distracted to follow through, I got freshly fried potato wedges and ate them quietly, pretending there was ketchup too.

These casual chats with hotel chefs excited him, and when we settled back into the truck, he was energized and boastful. “Ah,” he would sigh, “such an interesting talk we just had! You see how important it is what I do? They liked me, didn’t they, Gila? You can tell. It’s amazing we have this account, amazing. It’s because your father is charming! Eh? You should be proud of me. This is
putting you through school! I’d like to see one of your parent’s friends find something in common with an Italian hotel chef, huh? You see why I say that your schoolwork isn’t everything? Because you have to be well-rounded. Having money isn’t everything, believe me. You’ll see when you get older what’s important in life.”

Everything in the truck was plastic and factory grey.

Because it was the driver’s front section of a delivery truck, it was so narrow we sat with our backs to the rear metal wall and our knees to the window. When the hot air was on it blew steadily onto our faces. The classical music chimed as if from inside our ears.

“I loved my mother,” he would tell me. “She was the gentlest person anyone knew. I’m not exaggerating. Her nickname in Yiddish was guwtcha for the ‘good one.’ Always smiling, always trying to make something better. Even when things were difficult – and Gila they were, don’t get me wrong. This was Palestine before it was even a country! There were enemies everywhere. Difficulty getting food. Fights over everything. No one knew if we’d become independent or if the world would let us be wiped out again. Constant aggravation. Constant. You understand? Not like the way you kids grow up in North America, never worrying if there will be missiles over your head or a war the next day. Do you understand what I’m explaining to you? Are you listening? Is this too complicated for you, or are you following? I talk to you like you’re an adult, okay. I’m sharing with you wisdom that you’re going to use for the rest of your life. I know you’re still young, but you can imagine the situations I’m describing, yes. Okay, so listen. Those were the conditions and people were bitter and worried but not my mother, never.”

“She just smiled and made sure I had what I liked to eat. Always, she made sure I had what I liked to eat. Can you believe it? I loved chicken cutlets, and even when no one else had flour to bake with, she made me my favorite food to eat. I’m getting emotional even now.”
“Ah, I wish that you could have met her.”

“Gila, she died when I was still so young.
    “Brings me to tears to think how much you would have liked her. No?”

I nod and ask about the window. I cannot roll it down myself but want some air.
    “You’ll catch a cold,” he says.

“Do you see how important it is to be good like she was?”

“That’s why you’re named after her.”

Gila means happiness.

“I know I’ve told you that before but you really need to appreciate how important it is to be good and to bring people joy like she did.
    I hope you’re listening carefully to what I’m telling you.
    She was an amazing woman, my mother. She died so young.”

*I’m sorry that you’re so sad, daddy.*

“Thank you, Gila. It’s good for me to talk like this. You understand me, I can tell. I don’t know how I got so lucky to have such a daughter like you, huh? Your mother isn’t able – well, it’s ok. We both know what your mother’s limitations are. She loves you though, the two of you. She’s just not capable – let’s not talk about her now, okay? We’ll be back at the business soon anyway.”

He sighed and drove and looked so wistful.
    He seemed so lonely sitting all dressed for the winter in his dessert delivery van.

*I want to try to be good like you’re telling me.*

“That’s good, Gila, that’s good. That’s what I like to hear.”
I ask him to lower the heat because my skin is so itchy, but he says I’ll get used to it, “no.”

“As long as you take after her and don’t become anything like your grandfather, you’ll be okay.”

I seized any occasion he mentioned his father to ask who this mysterious figure had been. I could never learn more than that he had been a world-renowned professor brought by the British to Palestine with other Viennese virtuosos to found the university there. I knew my father’s face grew darker when he mentioned him.

“He was an awful man, okay. I wasn’t good enough for him, not smart enough to be his son. What more is there to know? I don’t want to talk about him, okay?”

“But dad,” I would plead, “I just want to ask you one question.”

“No,” he would say, shaking his head, checking the rearview mirrors, suddenly anxious other cars were too close.

“There’s nothing to know, okay? He was brilliant, but that’s all he was. A typical intellectual who cares about his studies only. That’s why I’m always telling you that being smart is not the most important thing. Take your mother – she can’t understand what they’re saying in the newspaper, right? Not in a sophisticated way like I can or even like you. Even though you’re only in second grade, you can make sense of things, okay. Even without so much help you can piece things together okay, but she can’t, right? But look how she can make the cakes we’re selling. You see that different people have different skills? There’s nothing wrong with that, Gila. And it’s very important to remember that it’s much more important to be a good person than to be brilliant. I know maybe you think that I’m exaggerating but these are life lessons I’m giving you here. He was –”

*Why are you so angry, I kept wanting to ask him. Did he hit you or starve you? Did he say cruel things? What did he do that made you hate him so much?*
He sounded like a boy yelling at a parent who had already left the room.

“There’s nothing more to say about my father, okay? I wasn’t good enough to be his son and, okay, so there’s nothing you can do. But, if it’s the last thing I do, I’ll make sure that you turn out nothing like him. I don’t care how much you like reading books or how smart your teachers say you are. I care about how you treat your mother and your brother. That’s what matters. How you treat people who are less able than you, not how much you know about something or another.

No work is more important than being a good person, okay? Understand?

I will take away your books faster than you will have a chance to notice if I ever catch you being arrogant or thinking that you’re special.”

But dad –

“I hope you’re listening carefully, Gila. Because there’s nothing more important than family.”

But dad –

“You’re still little and you can still listen to me when I’m talking to you. I don’t care how good you are in school. You understand? What matters is how you treat the ones that need you. Are you listening to me Gila?”

Yes, but dad I didn’t do anything –

“Your brother is a good example. Obviously, he’s nothing like you. The boy can’t string two sentences together, ok, probably something’s not exactly right with him but that never gives you the right not to help him when he needs you. Do you understand?”

I watched him work himself up into conviction.

Feel proud and accused.

Becoming wounded.

“That’s why we have the business. It isn’t fancy like your friends’ parents who are lawyers and doctors, but I’m fed up with those
people who have to think they know so much. That’s not for me. I’m happy selling cakes.”

I wanted desperately to reassure him. You’re not a failure daddy, I believe you.

“What can I say to you, Gila? Being successful isn’t everything! Look how happy those chefs were with the cakes we brought them, right? I’m building a business, damn it. You saw it for yourself, no? This is your business too. Remember that.”

Can we open the window a little?

I am gasping like I’m suffocating in this relentlessly hot blowing air.

“You understand what I’m saying to you?

I called it Gateaux-Gil because I named it after you! Don’t ever let yourself forget that. This is your business too. One day it will be yours, okay? Are you listening? You see how much your father loves you.”
The cold air slapped our faces when after hours of being cocooned in the overheated driver’s quarters of the delivery truck the doors were opened and we put our feet on the ground. Our van was painted burgundy with our logo in gold because my father said he liked the royal connotations. But, maybe because regal paint colors aren’t well absorbed by Toyota metal, our cake-mobile ended up looking less like a confectioner’s chariot than a tacky truck begging unsubtly for admiration.

There was a huge “#47” painted in bright white on all three sides; this way people will think we have 46 other trucks! And our telephone number 905-709-CAKE broadcast in eager yellow.

As we waited for the industrial-sized garage door to rise up and open so we could park the truck inside the business and unload our empty trays, I wondered what was happening on the other side. Was my brother standing on stacked crates, splashing water in those metal sinks he couldn’t reach, promising to wash bowls but watching bubbles overflow instead? Was our mom frosting a cake, impatiently, intently, her arm suspended in midair while the turntable exposed new angles to cover with cream, her olive skin polka dotted with chocolate, burly-bodied in an oversized t-shirt tightly stretched across her chest with the apron at half-mast around her waist?

I imagined running up to where she stood, inhaling the crisp fresh air and standing beside her while she worked. “Move!” she’d say, annoyed and push me. “Stupid girl, standing in my way.”

She wouldn’t ask me how the drive was or if I’d eaten. She didn’t wonder if there was something I would like to say. It was obvious that any manifestation of the idea I existed aggravated and enraged her, and I could see that in how she shut me up and cut me off and shoved me, hard. What a fresh wound every trace of my existing causes that I can’t repair.

“What do you want from me?” she’d bellow. “Standing like an idiot while I’m working. WHAT? MOVE! Always looking, huh, what do you think you see?”
She would be focused on cake-making motions, uncarefully but with all her strength, and might say, “Nu, pass the piping jelly. What are you standing there.” Then she might say, “How does it look?” And, she would flash a grimace cracked with pride at those crooked sponge cake tiers held together by overbeaten cream and wipe her bangs away with the backside of the hand that still held tightly to the palette knife and say, “It’s not so bad, you see? While you do nothing, how hard I work?” And, I could tell that she was tired then, her breathing heavy with fatigue, defeat, her face uncurious, satisfied, and not-minding I was there.

She is the baker and my father is the businessman, but she always says how much she hates making those stupid cakes! When my father walks in to see her throwing slabs of Belgian chocolate onto the table or slamming metal bowls into the sink he says, “Rough day, my favorite baker? The chocolate bother you today?” and tries to put his arm around her overweight and overheating frame. After too many instances of reassuring customers, “trust me, the chocolate mousse only looks like it’s missing the correct number of rosettes! We like to change up the décor every now and then, eh? To be original!” He hires a professional pastry chef to make most of the cakes. There are still certain things she’s stuck having to do and when he hears a lot of banging from his office he comes out and says, “Is it time for coffee, Alla? Looks like the meringue is getting on your nerves today? Let’s give it some peace and quiet, maybe you’ll be in a different mood later?”

Most of the time, when the metal door finally rose high enough off the ground, it was as if we deplaned from a spacecraft and were light years away. There was screaming and commotion. Air bursting with cold and loud shrieking.

Mother and son were usually mid-chase: her running after him with a spatula aiming for his backside and him laughing uproariously while squeezing his six-year-old body behind pails of sugar that were taller and wider than him. She would scream and wave her metal sabre while he zigzagged his skinny exuberant frame between the cylindrical columns of powders and flours that filled the space like reeds.
“I’m going to kill your son!” she’d say when the industrial garage door opens and sees us standing there wide-eyed and stunned like refugees from somewhere far away and quiet.

“Get him, Alex, or I swear to God I’m going...I don’t even know what I’m going to do to him yet! He is...he is...a monster! He really is! Alex, I hate him. I hate him! Animal! That’s what he is, an animal! Gila, what are you staring at? Can’t you see the syrup your stupid brother spilled across the floor? How useless and stupid can you be? Go! Now! Get a mop and start cleaning! Now! What the hell are you waiting for? Move! Now! Alex, she is a waste of space, a waste, you understand? Look at these disgusting children, nu, you tell me? How can someone live with them? They are monsters, both of them. At least he is wild, hyper, a boy, but her, look at her, Alex, look, standing there like a useless idiot. What are you looking at already, stupid girl? I said to go and clean!”

Immediately, I want to get back in the truck where it is so overstuffed with heat. I cannot breathe and think I will not breathe ever again.

His every word was clinging, pleading for agreement. Yes, I see you’re hurting. Yes, you’re right. You’re wronged.

I want to drive back to Blue Mountain Golf Club and listen again and again to how clever he is.

I see this is chaos and I have been spared. That every moment I’m still standing makes her madder – that I’m standing? That I’m still? My transfixed face infuriates.

I see how hard you’re working, dad.
I see we are alike.

There is motion and commotion here. The mother and son will be like this for hours.
Maybe I could inch away until it’s over. If I could make it to the office without them noticing, I could read.

I was afraid that drive would never end.

Afraid he’d want me next to him forever.

_I won’t be a professor, dad, I promise._

I promise I’ll be nice to you when I grow up.

The business has my name on it.

“I leave people with a good taste in their mouths, that’s what you say to strangers who ask what you do.”

You ask me, “do I see what you have made?”

*Gateaux-Gil,* “the first word is for ‘cakes’ in French. The second is for my daughter.”

“My mother was nicknamed ‘the good one.’”

*Gila* means happiness.

In Hebrew.

*Gateaux* means cakes in French.

He says “call me Belgian,” no one ever comes from there anyway.

I’m named after the good one, the business is named after me.

*But I don’t want your baby, daddy, please.*
He’d been dead seven years when I suddenly noticed I couldn’t conjure the sound of his talking.

And I wonder, should I add it to the pile?

After all, there is a heap of cherished things I can’t retain.

The way he laughed or walked, for instance.

The way he playfully elongated my name to coax me out of bed some mornings. I hated the nickname enough to wake up shouting, *stop it dad! You’re so annoying.*

As I strain to recall his professorial lilt, I notice how ugly this kitchen is, how inhospitable.

On the phone, Ms. Tobin keeps telling me to go to therapy. “I know it won’t change everything,” she whispers and I bark back, “What’s to change?”

I imagine how she cocks her head and looks at me exasperatedly.

It’s something about my “running so much,” and she keeps telling me, “you have to stop it” and “admit.”

She even says, “You’ll crash one day, you’ll see, you can’t keep running like you do from everything that happened. You can’t keep trying to *do* everything, keep everything intact.” But, I have no idea what she means by “stopping” doing what I never *started.*

She says, “go to therapy” and then “come over, afterward.” *Come over.* Sit at the table where her children eat, it’s warm there and so quiet.

*What is she thinking? Come over afterward.*

Where her family eats.

I need to *be* in this kitchen, *liking* this kitchen, smiling, do you need help *cleaning* this kitchen?

I can talk to the dead in my head, to the living I smile

let me help you with those dishes

let me decorate that cake
let me tell you what I know of tortes, meringues, and petits fours.

“You’re a good kid,” Ms. Tobin she says to me sometimes and I picture how she wants to stroke my face, if it wasn’t so awkward. If I wasn’t so tough or don’t-touch-me untouchable.

“You’re only seventeen,” she says to me often, “your mother’s an adult, you can’t control –”

She understands nothing. *I’m not listening, promise.*

She’s only a teacher who thinks I’m a helper.

What the fuck is she thinking, *come over?*

Before I went away to college, I helped devise a budget so our mother could balance the books in the bakery while I was in school, but a week after I left she bought this huge, expensive house instead.

I knew better than to shriek *what have you done?*

So I only said, “Mum please tell me that you’re paying half-and-half with him? You know we can’t afford the whole thing?” To which she slammed the phone back into the wall-mounted receiver and when – after many hours of calling her back and begging her to listen, she finally agreed to answer – said, it’s none of your business! You are a selfish, ungrateful bitch. I owe you *nothing!* NOTHING! Understand?!”

I understand. Of course, I understand.

She needs me when the mess she’s made becomes too scary. But when she sees me running after her, gathering the debris of what she’s blown to shreds, each piece still glowing with the heat it still harbors, she hates me, screams, “You selfish creature, how dare you try to make things neat?”
I hear you say forgive them, just forgive them, for they know not – and they can’t.

I said, “This means we’re going to lose the business.” But, my threat, of course, just makes her hiss back “so?”

“So what? What are you going to do about it? –”

She’s laughing, eyes wide, eager, “it’s your problem, don’t you understand? I don’t give a shit what happens to this stupid business. It was your father’s and then he left me so go, you stupid girl, leave me alone! Who wants a fucking life of making cakes? Go” – she thunders, shoves me – “go! You were his favorite, always crying to him, and he thought you were so sweet, go see if you can stop me!”

When you said take care, you meant forgive? Always there is another cheek to give.

“Go!” the mother says, “I dare you.”

“Come over,” says Ms. Tobin, “I’ll be here.”

Where are you, dad? I need to know. This kitchen she just bought and can’t afford is so ugly and I’m tired.
The day after he died, she sobbed and chanted, “What will I do? We’ll end up homeless without your father taking care of us. Homeless! Oh my god, what’s going to happen to us? Oh my god, we’re going to die, we’re going to die.”

D buried his ten-year old body into her heaving chest. He was chubby from four years of the macaroni and cheese dinners I made him and she whimpered and moaned into the ringlets of his hair – I can’t do the things he did, I can’t, it’s a matter of time before we’re going to be homeless – and then she became listless and leaden, the louder and harder he shook.

She didn’t notice I was there until I promised I would do whatever was needed to keep us all afloat.

Then she nodded blankly into a barren space. As if to show me the abyss that was there no matter what I offered.

I said, “I will take two buses after school to get to the business every afternoon.”

I said, “we’ll start by cleaning out the office.”

I said, “do you know where the accounting books are?”

When she nodded, I said, “That’s great! See how well we are doing already?”

I said, “Is it too much to ask if you know what his sales pitch was,” and when she shook her head ferociously, I said, “you know, who needs it anyway? It’s not like we’re going to be able to do exactly what he did anyway.”

When I then realized I had no idea how we would avoid going bankrupt, I said, “let’s just start with filling the showcase with cakes. Can you get into the routine of making the same dozen tortes every week?”

When she nodded, I thought, okay, good, then you will do what you do best and I will help the customers.

Like an ocean a pebble has been thrown into, her face expanded into minor ripples, then swallowed whole whatever paltry rock disturbed her placid stare.

You can sink into but can’t dent the impassive, stolid sea.
I said, “We’re going to be okay.” I said, “We don’t need much and I’ll repeat the things dad did.” I said, “Please mum, don’t be upset, I’ll be helpful, really helpful.”

For once, my talking didn’t make her angry and I could see that she didn’t hate me after all. Maybe all this time she was only helpless. Now I knew if I could do the things she needed, she would see that I wasn’t trying to ruin her life, that I was really always on her side.

I watched her vacantly cry onto D and recognized this as the lostness I could feel was always underneath her fury.

It wouldn’t be so hard to help her.
   I could take charge of things she couldn’t handle.
   She would see how much I loved her when she saw how hard I worked.

This only means I get up early. And help make cakes and copy what I saw him do.

I couldn’t reach the counters.

And, I couldn’t do the math.

I said, “mum, if I’m going to run a business, I need a cash register that calculates $20 minus $13.95 quickly.”
   She turned to me, incredulous – “you’re not embarrassed to be so stupid?” –

But, wait! I thought, I’m trying to help you.
   Wait, no, remember, I’m on your side.

She pet D’s curls and shook her head.

The doe-eyed boy peeked out from her embrace. Because he doesn’t have the language even to ask this, the entire weight of what the fuck’s going to happen resides in his watery, bottomless eyes.
While she glared, disgusted with me, I said I’m just not good at math.

I won’t be stupid with the other things, you’ll see.

Her gold-hooped earrings swooshed back and forth, her blond-brown hair moving slightly from the wind her movements made.

Customers can be so forgiving it hurts.
I came home from college and I sat against the kitchen cabinets and wept.

I said, I just can’t go, I can’t.

Knowing I was home from school, Ms. Tobin called and said, “Gila, I can tell over the phone you’re crying. What I don’t understand is what you mean when you say you can’t leave.”

Her voice so soft, I closed my eyes and tucked into her question.

“Gila,” she said, “talk to me. You keep saying you can’t leave. Tell me why. Why can’t you leave?”

Each question like a blanket she spread beneath my knees.

“Talk to me, Gila. You know I get worried when I hear you that quiet. I can hear that you’re upset. College is a big transition, but it’s an appropriate one. You need to say something to me. You need to say more than just you can’t.”

The receiver breathing near my ear, I feel her questions stroke the sound waves.

As if she’s skipping over me to ask my skin instead.

You are an angel, Ms. Tobin, in all-black attire and pin-straight grey hair.

I want to yield you everything.

Keep talking and I’ll rest my head.

“Are you worried about your mother and D? Is that why you say you can’t go away? But Gila, it’s not your job to take care of them for the rest of your life. You deserve to go away to school, okay? Do you hear me? You got a full scholarship, for god’s sake.”

She thinks I’m scared of my first day of school.
She thinks I’m prone to overcomplicate my wishes, and now she’s coaxing me to recognize – admit – a Bachelor of Arts can’t augur real-life doom.

I hear her tenderness, I do, but my mind is stuck in a room with his dying a decade away.

❦
When possible, I pretended I was sleeping, my back to his chest, holding my breathing.

When his chemo made him too enfeebled for long-distance drives, he lay down next to me at nights in bed and talked and wept to me from there, my twin mattress with ninja turtle sheets the new venue for our private congress.

I pretended I was sleeping, my back to his chest, holding my breathing.

I was becoming immune to doomsday pontifications and felt myself shrug when he said I would need to be strong because any day now things would get worse. *How much worse could things get?* I sometimes wanted to scream.

*The other day, I rushed to find you when you cried for help and soon D and I were lifting you from having fallen near the toilet, your pants stuck at the knees, your vegetative weight too dense for our nine- and ten-year-old bodies to carry. I don’t see how it could get worse than seeing your blood cancer lesions bespeckle your freckly skin or watching you wither before us, coughing your lungs into a cup or a pillow, choking on air until every room everywhere resounds with your rattle.*

I tell myself I’ve learned to navigate the scenes of his decay.

I wind myself around the wheelchair, close my eyes to unhear his cough.

When he points with a shaking finger at a glass of old orange juice encrusted with residual pulp, the straw so mangled there’s no way liquid could pass through, and says he’s thirsty: “Hold the glass under my chin so I can drink.” I am obedient but turn my eyes myopic. I do not see the glass I’m holding, the food stuck in the beard he’s too immune-deficient to shave, or the stench of bedriddenness his every minor movement exhales.

I curl up with my knees to my chin and my back to his talking. Sometimes, I lay flat and pretend to sleep.
I know I’m callous and ungracious.

I want to tell him I don’t care about his going. *Can your exit take another route?*

I won’t keep crumbling every time you come in here and spill your grief and say, “come closer, and say, please hug me, please, Gila, it hurts so much, forgive me Gila, please, you understand.”

I want to say, *I won’t keep lying here, just waiting for you to crawl in here and decompose.*

His agony like a sack of heavy bones I can’t wiggle out from under.

I want to say, *can you just die already?* if that will mean at night I fall asleep without your heaving chest against my neck.

Except, sometimes he cries from a well so deep and disbelieving, I then worry he’s already gone. “I don’t want to die!” he shrieks and repeats. “Gila, I don’t want to die!”

“No, don’t say that, daddy, no, please no,” I suddenly say, and turn and fling my arms around his neck.

No more pretending things I’d say to him, pretending I’m asleep.

“I finally found what I wanted! You and D and the business. No! Gila, no.”

*No,* I cry, *don’t say that, daddy,* no, my crying catching up to his, joining his, until together we’re howling from the same bottom of bereft.

I want to say, *stop begging, stop saying that we’re dying, stop saying there’s nothing we can do.*

I say, “I will do anything. Just tell me what to do.”

“I don’t want to die!” He keeps screaming and begging.

There is not enough air for these gasps of despair.
“I am finally settled, you and D, your mother. It took me so long to find what I wanted. I was lost and kept looking for something. I didn’t know what, until you, and the business. And mum and the boy. I want to see you grow up! You are everything to me. If I die now, I won’t see you grow up?! How...Gila, no!”

\textit{Dad, I will do anything you ask me.}
Yes, I’ll come closer, keep holding your head in my hands.

His need is tremendous, my body was small.

I try, when I hug him, to secure a pocket of air for my head so I can keep breathing.

No, I won’t leave you, I promise. Yes, I’ll forget how weak you became but hold onto everything else like you asked me.
I’ll make it like you never left.

I promise.

When he finally leaves, I turn my face toward the pillow and cry where no one hears me. I tell God, \textit{you have to save him.}

\textit{You} who never sleeps and never rests, come down and intervene with me.
\textit{You} see that I am good deep down.
\textit{You} see that I need help.
\textit{You} who makes the earth and heaven, don’t take away my father, \textit{please}.
\textit{You} came to David in the wilderness. Alone, in hiding, with his harp. Can’t you see I’m also desperate? Come now and make his going stop.
Our Father who protects his children, it’s me who’s calling out. \textit{Mi ma’amakim}.
\textit{You} have to save him, we can’t without him, please.
He was more sober in the daytime.

Propped up by several pillows, he held court at his bedside, patting with his veiny, spotted hand a space of sweat-soaked sheets for me to sit on while I awaited my assignment on what to do after he died.

There were pill bottles strewn across the bed, thick medical textbooks in piles on the grey carpeted floor.

He presided over this urine-drenched kingdom with such authoritative splendor it looked as though this was a mess that military strategizing made. As if the sheets were crumpled and distressed because he was knee deep in oversized maps of enemy territory. As if outstretched ambition had caused this disarray and not leukemia.

“Let’s be honest,” he’d begin each time. “We both know this disease is going to kill me”.

When these meetings started, he was still strong enough to pick me up and hoist me on the bed. My legs in tomboy jeans dangling, half-wanting to kick the IV machine to see what would happen, mostly wanting to look serious enough to deserve being in this war room consulting with the general.

I am his deputy and we have a mission.

I think of stories that I learned in Hebrew School. God pulls aside a humble, unsuspecting soul and says, I’ve chosen you to be my special helper. Come forward, make your father-maker proud.

I nodded earnestly as the commandments floated.

Take care of them, the both of them.

He’s wild, I know, but he looks up to you. She is – what can I say to you? She’s...

She loves you, but it’s hard for her.
We both know she can’t do what it takes.
You don’t have a choice.
It’s not your fault this is happening, but do you think I want it either?
He looks up to you.
Don’t get angry with her.
I’m counting on you, Gila.

But wait! I want to interject immediately, what if they don’t listen?

Like when I ask her what time she’s coming home and she laughs and says “when you see me, that’s when I’m home! Asking like I owe you something. So selfish, so pathetic, it’s unbelievable! What right have you to know when I’ll be home?”

When I call her after school and say, “It’s been an hour, me and D are worried, are you coming? Will you pick us up today?” she yells into the phone, “how dare you be so selfish? Maybe I will never pick you up, did that occur to you? Huh? You’re so smart, yes? Your teachers think you’re smart? So, go, find yourself a way to get home. I have had enough of such an ugly voice asking all the time these selfish questions. Is that you crying? You’re not ashamed to be such a baby at ten years old? Get it through your head, you stupid girl. I’m not your father who cares about you when you cry. Poor Gila, always trying to protect you like you can’t be hurt! How manipulative you are, daddy, daddy always what I hear. You are disgusting, don’t you see that? Acting like a victim when I’m the one who should be taken care of. Me! Oh, how much I hate you! I can’t stand you, nu, get that through your head. Hang up the phone right now and pray or do whatever you want, cry to someone else. I don’t care, just go to hell! Your teachers love you? Maybe they can bring you and your brother home.”

She puts my questions in her mouth to make me taste their gross offense.

She has an accent but not of any language spoken.

She is from Belarus, but says she thinks in English now. People always ask her where she’s from and she giggles as if inscrutable is a compliment, not a sign of their confusion.
She has a screaming voice and flirting voice and sometimes she sounds as though she isn’t there.

It’s mostly gruffness, heat for emphasis, words too narrow for her feeling, sentences too late for thought.

I notice other mothers ask their children how school was or if they’re cold or if they’re hungry, but if I start to say something I learned that day, or thought, or want, she cuts me off, abruptly, says with fury “I burned my hand today, okay? in the oven, stupid, shitty oven.”

If my father boasts of a smart thing I said or did, she looks restless and increasingly annoyed, then bangs and breaks a plate or kicks a door. She shouts, “This chair, this shelf; this whole house is in my way, I can’t do anything! Stupid furniture! I hate this house! Why am I standing here when she is doing nothing? Entitled brat!”

I know he’ll worry if I scratch my knee (It could be broken! You never know!), but if she sees me limping, wincing, holding my stomach, shaking, she starts to push me, glare, silent and enraged. “Why are you walking slowly? Stupid girl. Nu? You think you’re special? Something wrong with you? Move! Who do you think you are? You think anyone except your father cares how you are feeling?”

As soon as he gets sick, there are no more doctor visits or teacher meetings.

“To hell with everyone!” she shouts a few times daily, while swerving the car and smashing vases. “It’s not my problem, understand? Who wants you anyway, you tell me, you disgusting waste of space.”

When she puts me in a dress she bought, she glows excitedly at what she’s made, but if I squirm or whine, Please, I like my corduroy pants better, she lunges at me to rip the outfit off herself, swears. “No more clothes for you, ungrateful bitch! It’s not my job to serve you what you like, okay? Who do you think you are,
having preferences? Who do you think you are? What does it matter what you like? You stupid spoiled piece of shit, you’re getting nothing from now on, I promise! Absolutely nothing –”

If I cry and then apologize, she yells to, “save your tears for someone else! I would let you cry yourself to death, what do I care? Maybe you’d learn something. You give me absolutely nothing, nothing, do you understand? Maybe your father thinks you’re innocent but I know better. Manipulative little bitch! Don’t let me hear another cry from you or I swear to god, you better run, now, go, always asking for attention. What about me? Did it occur to you that I need things? Who do you think you are? Crying like a baby when you’re eight years old?”

Once he dies, she’s always saying, “Now, it’s time for war! You stupid girl! You don’t know anything, understand? You’re always looking, trying to understand, but you’re such a waste, such a rotten and retarded girl. What can you offer? Nothing! Your father loved me, only he did, the rest of you are horrible! Now look at you! Looking scared. How dare you act like such a disgusting baby! What are you crying about? Huh? Your life is easy! I’m too good to you, that’s the problem, nu. You spoiled piece of shit. You are how old? Eleven now? Twelve? You have no clue. No clue how much I still can hurt you. You think because you’re smart. Because your teachers like you. Don’t let me see your face or I’m going to throw you out, I promise! Looking scared! Yeah? You should! Get out! Now! Out!”

Her eyes are shining brightly in these moments, daring and sure.

As if she knows something of chaos I am unwilling, still, to learn.

As if this world is what her world feels like, always.

As if to say, we are all in total chaos now, see? Let’s see how many smart ideas you’re having now, when you don’t know the next time you’ll eat.

Welcome to my world, you spoiled, sheltered-talking thing who always wants to know. I dare you to keep bothering me with stupid questions.
He knows that she is like this, right? Sometimes, I’m sure he has to overhear her say, “You’re lucky your father walked in because I can’t stand to see your ugly crying face ,” and sometimes he even says to her, “Enough, Alla, okay? The kids need to eat, even though you are fed up with them. I don’t blame you. It’s hard to make so many cakes, okay? But make them something simple, please. They’re starving, okay, can you do that?”

When she roars back, “Let them go to hell! Those rotten creatures, if it wasn’t for you, I’d like to see how long they’d last! Ha! I want to see. Nu Alex, don’t defend them! I want to see how long they’d last without you always taking their side!” He whispers gently that he knows how awful kids can be and he will lecture us. Gila understands what she’s done wrong. He says, “You’re right, they need to be more independent. She didn’t mean to make you angry. In her mind, maybe she wasn’t talking back to you, she was just trying to explain herself.”

What does he mean, “take care of them?”

There is a small dog I tell my friend I can take care of. We are ten years old. The dog is white and black and very small. Although, when I checked if we could babysit my school friend’s dog, she said, “Why are you bothering me with nonsense about your stupid friends? I don’t know or care about your friends. I’m tired, can’t you see that?” “But my father says it’s only for three days, we’ll make it work.”

He’s away that day making deliveries to golf clubs out of town. We have keys to their house, the tiny dog is in a locked plastic crate, and we are supposed to pick it up early in the morning. I wake her up, excited. “Why are you bothering me? I’m not leaving the house so early, why would I do that?” “Because,” I start to panic-whine, “because we said we’d pick up Freddie and –”

“Who is this Freddie?”

“Mum, I told you. The girl from school that I’m friends with? Karen? Her dog. Dad said –”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about –”

“But, mum, we promised. The dog is –”
“You stop whining now or I’m going to smack you. I don’t know who this Karen is. Or her dog and I don’t care. I have errands to run, I’m going –”

“But, wait –”

“No! I’m getting dressed and going. You think your stupid friend is more important than everything else?”

“No, I wasn’t saying that. Please. But the dog is there all by himself.”

“Where is her house?”

“I don’t know. You drove me there before. I don’t know directions anywhere. Maybe I can find the address in the school book or something.”

“Well, you better find it quick. I’m leaving. I’m not going to stand around here waiting for you.”

“But mum, you took me there before, remember? For her birthday party and –”

“No!”

“But then, what if I can’t find it? Please. The dog is all by himself.”

“What a baby you are. Ten years old and starting to get so emotional. And for what? A stupid animal somewhere? I want to see you care so much for anyone but yourself. Huh? You think it’s possible? I don’t think so, no –”

“But mum, maybe if I find out where she lives we can go together and get him?”

“I’m not driving you there –”

“But dad is gone all day.”

“Well, then I guess that stupid dog, whatever his name is, can stay there by himself!”

Hours go by. She leaves the house while I’m hysterical, comes back, leaves again and says the dog is not her problem – neither am I.

When it’s nighttime, my father returns and I beg him to go and get the dog.

He says, “What happened here, can’t you see the child’s upset? Do I have to go myself?”

She glares at me and wordless, livid, knocks a side table over and grabs the keys.
When she returns half an hour later, she hurls the small cage to where I’m waiting and says, “Don’t let me see your face or I will kill you. You take your fucking dog and run where I don’t find you –”

The dog is covered in its own vomit and feces, shaking, starved.

What does he mean, take care of them?

Get up and go forth from your homeland, from your father’s house, your birthplace, unto a land that I will show you.

Every year, I win the school-wide contest of who can memorize more of the Bible.

David was out-sized by his opponent.

Is there a word for being put against something too huge? Not outnumbered or outdone. Not outmanned, exactly. Not overwhelmed, not overtaken. Not a feeling about a differential, not the act after it’s done. No – more like the knowledge slowly dawning of being disproportionately matched.

I imagine David had one gasp of panic before he went to find a rock and sling.

One “oh no no no no.”
One “no, I can’t. Don’t make me. No.”
From the depths I cried to you, he wrote while running from the king.

But prayer comes while running, not the no of standing still, standing dumbly, stiffly standing. Saying no is not to someone. Not only to someone. But to a knowledge you don’t want to know, no to knowing that the world is ending while you’re standing still just knowing. That the world is ending. While you are small and it is big and you are without something you can do. And your knowing keeps you standing and the knowing keeps you still.

Oh no no no no no.
Don’t make me. No.
From the depths I cried to you, oh lord, he wrote in hiding from the king. The same king who was his father once.

Lord of mine, will you please hear my voice. Bring your ear toward my cries.

I repeat the orphan-warrior’s fugitive please in my nighttime bedroom sky.

I think maybe he takes aside each one of them, like he does with me, and says, “When I’m gone, this is your task. You have to do the things I’m laying out before you on this day. Gila is in charge. You have to listen when she tells you what to do.”

We must be each bequeathed our wartime assignations. He has some other way he talks to them, I’m sure.

He has figured out where each one of us belongs. When the time comes and we’re on our own, we’ll go directly to the space marked x and get into position.

I nod to show I understand the mission.
He doesn’t know there is this game I play where I pretend that someone asks me which one of them I’d rather lose.

I sometimes tell the world to take him, I want to be with her instead.

Sometimes, when it’s a Sunday and she’s in a happy mood, she’ll say, “Gila, let’s go buy some drapes, I feel like sewing something for the house!” or, “there’s a sale at off the rack, let’s see what we can find!”

The velocity in her movement makes her every gleeful enterprise contagious. “Come, let’s go! Nu! I’m going to make a drape-thing, so perrty, to hang up in the house!” With sentences mangled by word choice and order and vivacity that makes anyone standing stably look dead, she swoops into a room and you can almost hear her gold hoop earrings flapping at her neck while she gesticulates her plans.

She never seems to know whether it’s too late or still early and she giggles while her eyes sparkle brightly as, in a flurry, she hatches a scheme. “Let’s go to the mall, stop to get a haircut on the way and then pick up a movie near the house before we leave because it closes later! Yes? Nu! Let’s go! It’s going to be fun!” And she isn’t wrong, it is. I swear sometimes I see the sparks that fly above her head while she is moving. She huffs and puffs when some mundane detail from reality causes her bustling stunt to stall, as if the limits of space and language don’t actually belong to her. “Nu!” she says, “What is this traffic?” and swerves the car in fury off the road.

Sometimes, I feel so sure her happiness cannot be ruined, I even ask her “can you hold my hand?” But then she stops abruptly and hisses with repulsion, “What? What do you want? Why would I do something like that? Why do you always have to bother me?”

I say, “I don’t know, just can you?” And so she does, but her hand is so listless when we interlock that I protest and whine, “That doesn’t count, Mum. Can you hold my hand for real?” And then she squeezes hard until it hurts.
She asks, “That better?” I see her irritation metamorphose into pleasure, as I squirm and try to pry her fingers loose.

“No,” I say, “Forget it.” “Good,” she says, “let’s go,” and wrests her arm away and laughs.

Our limbs go back where they belong and I wait and hope she will not say, “You see?” This misstep proves I still don’t disappear my self enough to be good company.

“Let’s check that store” is how I’ll know I am forgiven.

I yell inside myself, why don’t I ever learn? I keep wanting her to see that I’m okay but okay is only when she doesn’t have to notice me. I never learn. There’s no such thing as I’m okay.

I’m not supposed to take up any space, and any space is too much space. I’m not supposed to betray any sign there is a person there.

Eventually, she’ll see something to buy and I will nod so eagerly when she asks me if I like it.

When she fetches a sparkly, fluorescent peach outfit, I twist my unease into wonder because I know she’s happy stuffing my body into dresses, telling me to turn around, and matching it with this hat and what about these shoes.

“I always wanted my own little girl!” she exuberantly announces, “before you, I had only boys and I hated it! Hated your two half-brothers!” When we find exciting outfits she tells me how the other sons she had with a man before my dad “don’t count, you know? Because boys, they only take and take and give you nothing in return!”

In these moments, it is so clear there is no such thing as a well-behaved child when a dressed-up doll is what she really wants.

People say I look like dad, with our pale white skin and blue-green eyes, while she is hazel-eyed and olive colored with hair that’s blond or brown or reddish, and how overweight depends on if the diet’s working. She wears tight-fitting rayon blouses with frills along the neckline and big “PRADA” sequined letters sloping in and out across her breasts. There are leopard-print pants she likes to wear with a cheetah patterned turtleneck because she says, “It’s classy to mix and match the colors, and
you can’t tell these are designer knock-offs if you wear them with high leather heels and a purse that has another big designer name in gold metal."

Her face is hopeful while it scans the racks for bright new outfits, yet fragile like what’s cracked inside will break without more shiny clothes to put inside a closet that, like a mobile hanging above a crib, swirls around and around her head to soothe her.

I like to say you’re pretty to the pink shirt she’s trying on because when she feels that way, her hard face softens, her head bends gently, and for a moment she smiles a little less tersely. For a moment, her fear and bewilderment give way to rest.
Once, when she was at her most expansive, she told a story of something that happened when she was my age.

I knew that she had parents, a mother who was so mean she didn’t hesitate to hit her. Whenever she finally caught up with D to smack him, she’d cry immediately afterward that she didn’t mean to go that far. Sometimes, when my father wanted to insult her, he would calmly say, “It’s not your fault you’re rough sometimes. From where would you know any better? You didn’t have a warm mother like mine to teach you how to behave.” And, finding recognition in the condescension, she’d always cry and say, “I didn’t, Alex, see? It’s not my fault I am this way.”

My ears always perked at the prospect of a story. I always knew there was a hidden cause, a forest she got lost in, a basement she got left in, some awful, unimaginable deed that would explain how she got broken.

“Do you want to hear about how when I was your age, I once had rabbits?”

“You had a farm?” I say, intrigued.

“Sure!” she says excitedly. “Where the rabbits were when I was younger. Your age now, maybe seven or eight.”

“But, I didn’t know you grew up on a farm?” I ask, trying to picture the scene.

“Maybe it wasn’t a farm, exactly, I don’t know. We had animals, that’s what I know.”

“Like cows?”

“Sure. Maybe some cows.”

“Horses?”

“No horses.”

“Then, what other animals?”

“Gila, I don’t know, okay? We had chickens that my father used to cook for dinner.”

“Ew! Mum, that’s horrible!”

“What? Where do you think your meat comes from? It was a chicken once!”

“I didn’t know your father was a farmer.”

“He wasn’t a farmer. I didn’t say he was a farmer.”
“But you just said –”
“I don’t know what you want from me. We had chickens and rabbits –”
“Was there hay?”
“Of course!”
“Wow, so it probably was a farm, mum.”
“That’s what I’m trying to tell you!”
“And did you live on it?”
“Yes. No. It was part of the house. I don’t know. Why does it matter?”
“I don’t know. Because I wanted to see what it was –”
“There were chickens. Maybe roosters. Are those the same thing? Who knows or cares. The point is I used to like to play there by myself. I had a brother seven years younger but I wasn’t good to him the way you are to D. I used to torture him. I feel guilty thinking about the things I did to him then. Oh, well. It’s ok. But I liked to be there by myself and play with the rabbits after school. They were so cute. Yeah –”
“And so? Why did you stop?”
“Stop what?”
“You were telling me about the rabbits and then the story stopped.”
“Oh. I didn’t notice. Ha! I feel bad, that’s probably why.”
“But why do you feel bad? About your brother?”
“Who?”
“Your brother who you said that you were mean to?”
“Him, no. He deserved it. Everyone was always saying how gorgeous he was. I couldn’t take it anymore. I wanted him to suffer for once. Like I did – always being screamed at by our mother. Still, he had it so easy, it made me sick.”
“But your daddy loved you, right?”
“Yeah, sure. I was everything to him. But, it didn’t protect me from the way my mother used to beat me. But what would have? It was the days when parents did that. And in Russia, try getting involved in human rights or bullshit like that. Ha! Anyway, he was an angel and I hated him for it.”
“And that’s why you stopped talking about the farm?”
“What farm? Gila, what the hell are you talking about?”
“I don’t know. You were telling me about the rabbits you were playing with and that you did mean things to your brother and then you stopped talking.”

“Oh, yeah, okay, the rabbits. Yeah. There were two of them. These little white ones. What do you call them in English, the little ones?”

“Bunnies?”

“Yes, exactly! You see, you can be good for something! Bunnies. They were white and so small and I loved playing with them. And then – I don’t know what happened, they just died.”

“Wait, what? How?”

“I know, that’s it. Just like that. I don’t really know. First one, then....” She’s shaking her head dramatically as if seeing them before her now – dead. “Horrible, I know.”

“But, mum, how did they just die all of a sudden? Were they sick?”

“No. They were healthy.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes, absolutely. They were healthy. Only healthy rabbits. What did you call them?”

“Bunnies.”

“Bunnies. Only healthy ones. Plus, they were so young. What could have been wrong with them? Nothing.”

“But then what happened?”

“I don’t know.” She shakes her head again and looks dolorous.

“Who can tell?” she says with a smirk ever so faintly bubbling beneath an anguished face. “They are rabbits after all. Animals.”

“Maybe they were hungry?”

“I fed them.”

“Maybe they got hurt when you weren’t looking?”

“I was the one playing with them when they died.”

“Wait, what do you mean?”

“Just that! I was playing with them and then, before I knew it, they were dead.”

“Oh no, mum, that’s so bad, mum. What happened?”

“Yeah,” she says, staring forward into nowhere, blankly.

“I was playing with both of them. I wanted them to kiss.”

“And then what?”
“I don’t know. I just held one rabbit in one hand and the other in the other hand and I tried to bring them together so they could kiss and then I noticed one of them wasn’t playing anymore.”

“But –”

“I probably was too rough with them. Who knows?” She shrugs and performs the imaginary scene of one hand holding something it wants to shove into the other.

“Just like this,” she says with animated hands and bright, excited eyes.

“It was so funny because I didn’t know and I kept playing and playing. Then I noticed the rabbit in my hand wasn’t moving anymore.”

“And what about the other one?” I say, trying to stifle the horror radiating slowly.

“Huh? I don’t know. I think it died also.”

“What?! Both rabbits died?”

“I think so.” She faces downward with her childlike somber face.

“I didn’t mean to!” she proclaims. “I was just playing, and then I don’t know. Before I know it, they were dead.”

I wipe the look of mine that says, you killed those baby rabbits. I can hear my questions bouncing off her Teflon brain, echoing in my own ears without ever touching down for a single moment in her mind.

“It’s not your fault, mum. You were just playing, probably wanting to have fun.”

“Of course! Exactly. I didn’t mean to. I just wanted them to kiss. Stupid creatures. And I remember how small they were, too small for me to hold them. I knew it would be so nice if they could kiss each other. That’s all I tried to do. But they didn’t listen. You understand? Besides, I didn’t know they were so – what’s the word?”

“Small?”

“No, something else, when it can break so easily.”

“Delicate?”

“Yes! Exactly.”

“Fragile?”

“Huh? Yes, Nu, so tiny and pathetic!”
“Were you very sorry afterward?”
“Yes, of course I was! I’m not a monster!”
“I know, I know. It’s just... was your dad upset?”
“Yes, of course.”
“Were you punished?”
“No, because he knew I didn’t do it on purpose. I just wanted them to kiss.”
“And how did you become okay after?”
“What do you mean?”
“Like, after you told your father and you didn’t have the rabbits anymore, did you feel horrible? Did you still go to school?”
“Sure! Why not? I don’t understand your question.”
“How did you feel better after you saw what happened to them?”
“Yeah. I told you I was upset. But then, I don’t know. It’s so funny, isn’t it? That I was trying to make them kiss and instead I killed them!”
“But you must have been so sad then, when it happened? Right, mum?”
“What?! I don’t know what you mean.”
“That you were feeling sorry. I just mean that you must have felt really bad for what you did to them by accident.”
“Okay.”
“What?”
“Okay, so what?”
“I don’t know. Didn’t you feel very bad? I just don’t understand.”
“Gila! I don’t know what you want from me, okay?”
*What I want?* I’m looking for the feeling pulsing behind her eyes. It doesn’t have to be remorse or sadness, just anything other than this hollowness and pleasure.
“Mum, why are you staring at me in that way? I didn’t mean to hurt you and you look like you’re confused. I didn’t mean to be confusing.”
“Because I don’t know what you want from me, that’s all. I hit one into the other and they were too little, I guess, okay. Or, I was too rough, and what is there to understand except your mother is so silly sometimes? It’s such a funny thing that happened, Gila, no?” She’s irritated, agitated, angry, then dismissive and relieved.
No, I say inside, while nodding yes. She laughs and laughs and, looking sheepish and coquettish, waits for me to join her.
How am I supposed to watch them when he’s gone? He can’t mean really *watch* them, like he does with us.

Maybe what he means is be a helper, since he won’t be here to do the things in person. Covering for him while he’s away, until they’re fine again or he comes back. Kind of like his messenger.

God is always saying, trust me, never mind that you are weak and they are strong.

Trust me, go up to the sea and it will open. Go.

Except it isn’t only *they won’t listen* but this look she has that says she isn’t feeling anything – isn’t *there*.

Even when she smashes dishes, throws chairs against the wall, tells me she will kill the neighbor’s dog next time it runs too near the car, it isn’t really malice in her eyes, but hollow calmness where it’s impossible to tell how much it burns inside.

I am five or six and he isn’t home. She takes my stuffed toy tiger and shows me what it looks like emerging soaking wet, disfigured from the washing machine, holding it with two fingers by its ear. “He doesn’t look so nice to sleep with now!” she booms, smiling and staring while I plunge to retrieve it from her grasp.

“Always such a crying baby,” she taunts and laughs and pulls the tiger higher, “you think you’re going to tell your father? If this is what I do to him, your precious favorite tiger while you are sleeping, just think what I can do to you, huh? You stupid, sensitive, little girl. Just think before you tell your *daddy.*”

I know from how she’s smirking that she wants me to keep wailing, jumping up to reach my friend, only hungry for the pleasure of seeing something burning.

I say through my sobs, “I’ll be good from now on,” and, she slams the wet tiger with frustrated fury into the ground. “You will never be good, stupid girl, no matter what your silly father tells you: rotten to the core, you understand?”

There is a bonfire crackling, dancing across her brown eyes.

He can’t mean really *watch* them, like he does with us.
God is always saying, trust me. I only choose men that are able.
I am chosen. I am able.

There’s no such thing as an unready prophet.

Moses had a stutter. Jonah said, *you’re kidding!* Sarah laughed.
I will memorize his way of talking, calm and in control, laying out what everyone will do, offering to answer questions.
Repeat after me: You shall engrave God’s word upon the inner tablet of your soul.

I’ll say, mum and D, this is what we have before us. Let’s discuss how we’ll proceed.
When I say I won’t survive the absence of his soothing, measured, Belgian voice, I am not being sentimental.

I mean: thought is a sound that tethers me to language, sense. I mean: without words to bring another being near, it is a senseless, barren, ashen place. Like being told, behold! You’re naked. In a garden rated R. And you aren’t nine and curly-headed, naming the stuffed animals. And now you know nothing is there. And no one’s coming, ever, later. And I’m not Adam – knowing there’s a maker. I can’t do it, dad, all by myself.

You were dead two days. She bought me dresses. “Here,” she said, “to make you feel better, okay?” I could feel my shock vie with my rage and tie with incomprehension. What? What do you mean, you bought me dresses? Is this some kind of evil joke? What will I do with dresses? Dresses? As I prep my speech to welcome mourners since it’s my job – starting today! – to be a father, husband, grown-up man.

I train my outrage to scorch the earth her eyes are fastened on, but then I look and see the soil’s already bleached, blinded, and vacant. How do you scream at a mind already broken? She looks so lost, so fatally unknowing. And on the other hand, she’s telling me this is what she needs to like me. Even she won’t kill her favorite dressed-up doll. Wild, wilfull and bewildered. She’s giving me a uniform for my deployment to your absence. It’s not a garden, it’s a jungle and these dresses are fatigues to camouflage my difference. “Here,” she said, “I bought you dresses.”
Dresses?
Just when I noticed I was naked.
In a wasteland.
With no chance you’ll walk in later, ever.
“Here,” she said, “I bought you dresses.”
In a flash I see: this is a gift, protective,
as maternal as she’ll ever get.
I want to lay my tomboy body at her feet
and then destroy my arms for ever not being angled to her
chest in prayer,
for not being yet
already the doll-playing girl-doll this woman deserves.
The boys they take and take and never give.
“I always wanted a little girl,” she says, self-soothingly, “is that
so much to fucking ask?”
“Here,” she said. “Put on these dresses.”
“Here,” she said. “No talking but I give you dresses.”
Forget Adam naming all the animals. Think Mowgli in his
toga taming them.
I’ll need them to survive, won’t I?
I’m going to lose my mind not-talking, getting dressed in
dresses to be the girl-doll she needs and the prodigal son you
wanted.
I’m going to lose my mind not-talking.

The angel that rescues me, come!

I don’t care, dad, what you’re saying, only that you’re saying.
Tell me anything.
Things I know already, barely hear
your talking in my ear
is how I know I’m not alone.

These fragments I have –
Dad?

Don’t leave me in a land without you –
Dad!
We had a deal, I thought. *I let you die as long as you stay with me in my head.*

Dad?

*Forgive me father, please.*

I don’t know where your talking went?
Come back, dad, I can’t lose you.

*Tell me anything.*

I close my eyes and search for how you’d tell me what to do.
You’d say – ?
Come back, dad! I can’t lose you.

Are you listening?
I can’t lose you. Not the part of you that kept me going.
In a garden rated R.
In a wasteland, it’s a wasteland. Don’t leave me here, not-talking. Do you hear me?
Shhh.
I’m listening?
I can’t, dad. I can’t lose you, not like that, dad, not right now.

Not when realizing I can’t lose you is how I know no no no, know –
you’re gone already,
aren’t you?

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