

THE NIMROD LITERARY AWARDS  
*The Katherine Anne Porter Prize for Fiction*



SECOND PRIZE  
ELLEN RHUDY

*Would You Know Me*

The wedding party arrives without notice, a dozen men who shoulder past Fatima's desk into the stone-walled hall to the sulfur baths. Any brief kinship she feels at hearing their speaking Macedonian — most of the villagers are Albanian, and she speaks Macedonian only at home with her family — is gone by the time she smells their dense sharp odor of rakija mingled with sweat. One of the men swings a bottle from his right hand, hits it against the guestbook as he passes. He smiles at her, revealing a gap where a tooth once lived.

No one else is at the bath, and Fatima hesitates before following them to the men's pool with a stack of towels. She stays outside a moment, peering through the single-pane window set just above her eye level. They've spilled themselves into the waters, some still in their clothes, and she opens the door to lay the towels on the bench. She averts her eyes from the water-glossed tiles, the piles of clothes dampening themselves on the floor. When they leave she will try to extract their payment, 250 denars apiece. Back at her desk, she remains still in the pressing air, hair stuck to her neck, her shoulders.

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The whole village of Banjishte smells of sulfur. Their water tastes of it, the bite of rotting eggs present in every meal, though the flavor is inaccessible to Fatima, her family, everyone who is not a visitor. The story is that they are hardy thanks to their water. That once Skanderbeg himself, the great Albanian military commander, had rested here. That Mustafa Kemal Atatürk's grandparents had come to soak in these rich waters.

The baths are built of gray stone, housing two main bathing rooms with roofs that open to the sky. As a child, Fatima liked to stand in the warm water of the women's pool in winter, snowflakes

turning her hair white and flashing out of existence when they touched the water. There are semi-private baths as well, a dozen rooms allowing two people in their pools, which actually are all one but separated by walls that end several hand-widths above the floor. In each bath, two stone steps lead to a ledge where guests can rest chest-deep in the water or drop themselves to stand in the cloudy pool. The same water runs through all the pools, pouring from deep in the mountain. Despite the lack of doors it is mostly couples who rent the semi-private rooms, and Fatima walks past these baths only to make sure they have their towels and then to clean up after the people leave.

Once, back when the country was still under Communism, the baths were crowded with dying people grasping for this last chance at life. A fifty-bed hotel stands next to the baths—people drove from Skopje or even Belgrade, taking a week or two with their nurses, soaking in the waters and going home to die just the same. Fatima imagines their graves scattered across what was once Yugoslavia, imagines that the ground itself smells of these springs. That the waters that have wound themselves into so many dying men and women rise in waves from the earth, that these graves smell like a place Fatima has already been.

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The men's yells echo through the bath, and at her desk Fatima finds herself unsure whether to hope that someone will arrive to experience this with her or that she will be left to the discomfort on her own, an experience she can wipe from her memory as neatly as chalk from a slate. She checks the clock, walks back and forth across the stone entry, stands with a hand to the sweating glass door. She wonders if she should call a taxi from Debar. The heat and the liquor, the warm embrace of the water, must dissolve the men's desire to walk back to town, and it will take fifteen minutes, at least, for a taxi to arrive.

She hasn't managed to make a decision when they emerge a half-hour later, dripping water across the lobby. One of the men, a dark shadow of hair under the white shirt plastered to his chest, counts out damp denars, licking his fingers as he pulls apart the resisting bills. They wave off her offer of a taxi, and she watches them sway, laughing across the parking lot. One of them tests the

bottle and, finding it empty, throws it end over end into the grass. Fatima stares at their wet tracks shrinking into themselves as she blinks to try and shake away the image of the man's shirt. She thinks they have dragged and dripped half the pool onto her floors and knows she should clean before anyone else arrives. But a few more minutes, a few more. She stands next to the desk, leans her chin onto her forearms, watches the men turn to pinpricks in the valley.

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Fatima begins to clean only out of fear that another guest should arrive and see whatever mess these men left. Piles of soaked towels lie clumped on the splashed green tiles, and she gathers these to the laundry, dragging a mop on the walk back. The water itself is clean, no forgotten shirts floating against the drain. A row of lockers stands behind the benches on one wall, and she flips these open to check for any wallets or phones, running her hand over the locker doors as she walks back down the line, their clatter echoing as she takes her last look around the room.

There are two doors into the men's bath, one opening to the hall leading to the front desk, the other a more circuitous route passing the semi-private baths, rejoining the main hallway before it reaches the front desk. She takes the long way, pushing the mop ahead of her, flicking its damp gray braids across the stones in a vague gesture at cleaning.

She is almost to the end of the hallway, lit by the erratic flickers of the bare bulbs spaced between every two baths, no roof opening here to the natural light, when she sees the man.

He is lying half-in, half-out of a pool, his hand reaching for the hall's stone floor. A white shirt damped on his skin, the tail loose and pulsing in the faint flow of the water, his legs disappear into the pool.

Fatima drops the bucket, pushes on the man's shoulder. "Sir!" she shouts. "Mister! Wake up!"

He doesn't move, doesn't seem to hear her voice ringing against the walls, and she pushes his shoulder again. When he doesn't respond she bends to grab him by the armpits. He is too heavy to move, and she slips on the damp floor. She slides into the pool, her slippers abandoned, and stands on the second step

with water tugging at her knees. Scared of slipping into the pool herself—she is too short to stand in the private baths—she shifts, sits on the first step, tries to somehow lift or push against his shirt, finds she can't get any leverage the way she is, facing the bath. She scrapes her knees on the step as she turns, folds herself down to push up under his armpit and shift him, grasping centimeter by centimeter, from the pool, until she has to climb out, holding his shoulder, and move to his other side, pushing from his other armpit. She forgets to breathe; later she will find that somehow she has ripped her nails, her knuckles raw from scraping across the rough, wet stone. She leans into the man and pushes, moves to the floor itself and pulls until his upper body has collapsed into the hall and she can climb out, one hand bracing his back, and drags him—what she will later realize is an impossible weight—the rest of the way.

She pushes at his chest to shift him to his back. A red gash pulses from his forehead, swirls of blood mingling with the water pooled over the floor. She recognizes him as the man with the bottle, tapping it on her guestbook, laughing as he passed her by. She slaps his face, presses at first hesitantly and then less so on his stomach, plays out the life-saving motions she has seen on TV, forces air between the cool rubber of his lips, prays that one of these efforts will work. The bath gathers itself around them. The tick of water from her clothes, the shush of water flowing beneath stone, pool to pool, at their side.

The man's thick black hair is wet and his scalp shows between strands at the crown. When she touches his hair her hand comes away red, and after a moment she understands. She sits at the pool's edge, letting the water tug her skirt and wash it into the wall, unsure if the pink tinge in the water is a true thing. She leans forward, cups a handful of water, spills it across her hot face, stares at the water flowing around her feet. She will have to phone someone, but she's not sure whether it should be Alban—the bath's owner—or her parents or the Debar police. She doesn't want to phone anyone; she wants to leave and close the door behind her, locking it and never returning. She wants to move on from whatever happened here today. She wants to blot it from her memory. She wants a lot of things that are beyond her reach.

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When Fatima was sixteen, two years after she stopped attending the school in Debar, Alban's mother began to appear at her home for coffees. Fatima averted her eyes as she served the woman, whose black hair broke to reveal a narrow strip of silver at the part. Alban himself was twenty-four, and Fatima carried in trays of baklava and cookies with hope twined through her stomach. His father ran a bar from his home, a secret that everyone in the village knew, serving glasses of rakija for thirty denars apiece.

"That family is no good," her baba said, spitting in the dirt after Alban's mother left. "Their money is dirty. Why would you marry your daughter to a no-good like that?" Fatima's mother just waved her hand, dismissive.

Alban wore a pleather jacket, walked across the village like he owned it, served rakija to the bulb-nosed men who visited his home, but told Fatima, "I never take a drink myself—don't even think it." She held hands with him one time, sliding her hand from his grip when she saw her neighbor Alma walking down the road. And then it was over, as though it had never been. The story was that a friend of a family friend had introduced him to a girl in Skopje, eighteen years old and a high school graduate. She had bleached-blond hair and they were married the next August, and, not long after, Alban moved to the capital. It was a mystery to Fatima how he found the money to buy the baths, but a few years after his marriage he did, and a few years after that she went to work for him. It felt like an apology, an admission of guilt, like a thing she could accept.

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Fatima drags the man by his armpits, forces him to a slumped seat against the triple-width of bricks between the private baths. She doesn't know what she's doing and too late realizes it was better when he was lying across the floor. His head drops toward his right shoulder.

From the brick wall outside each bath a metal cup hangs on a nail, and Fatima takes one down, puts her legs back in the water. The first time she came to the baths as a child, she thought they were dirty, with flecks of ash and skin turning in the water, but

really there are shards of mineral, solid but ghostly. She dips the cup and pours the warm water across her knees, rubbing at her skirt where it's been stained by the bloodied water. She reaches for another cup and pours this over the man's face, cup after cup, using her fingers to work the blood from his hair. She has to find someone, tell someone, bring them here, but for minutes she watches the water wash over this man. It feels wrong to leave him; this won't be his last bath — that will fall to his family, but Fatima cannot help thinking it is. Cup after cup, a yearning for this to go away, never to have happened.

She leaves the cup bobbing in the water when she stands. She has made a mess: bloody water swirls on the stones, the water in the pool a dull pink. She will have to empty the baths, clean them, refill them. She finds the phone from under the front desk, dials the police in Debar. "The spa in Banjishte — there's a man, I think he hit his head — I don't know — I think he's dead — no, not breathing." She stays on the phone, breath ragged, until the woman tells her she's sent a car. Fatima hangs up, bloody fingerprints on the receiver, and sits on the steps before the parking lot. She doesn't want to be in that space anymore, to feel that man's shadow behind her. It's twenty minutes before the police arrive, two men in brown-green military uniforms, brown boots laced up above their ankles.

"What happened?" asks the first officer. He licks the tip of his ballpoint pen, holds it above a palm-sized notebook.

Already Fatima's memory is of a man face-down in water, hair drifting from his scalp, though she knows this isn't true, this isn't what happened. "I don't know," she says. "I found him back here — he was with some men who left." She leads the police to the private baths, forgetting to breathe, body dense with dread.

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When Alban hired her, almost ten years after his marriage, it was with the promise of greater things. He had already printed a sample of the bath's new brochure and handed it to Fatima so she could read it at home. She shared it with her mother and baba. She remembers, with a painful clarity, running her fingers down the list of services, reading them to the room, her father pausing at the door to listen. "A mud facial — a real Turkish bath — and here,

even massages!" She would be trained to do all of it, to lead guests through the baths, taking them from the steam room to a cold stone platform where she would shock them with a tossed bucket of frigid water. She would lean into their stiff muscles and make them cry with the strength of her hands. Willing these bodies, their folds and dimples and knotted backs, into submission. When her father told her she couldn't take the job, that it would bring shame on the family, she did the math and showed him how much she could earn for them. What would shame mean, against those figures? Even knowing she was taking something away from him by arguing for the job, she was happy.

Now, though, it is just her and the shifting waters and the tick of the clock, the blank pages of the guestbook. She thought she'd be in Skopje by now, with a position as an attendant in one of the Turkish baths, built and abandoned by the Ottomans. It was a thing that had never seemed too much to ask or hope for, even given where she began. Fatima could never say what she had hoped to find as an anonymous kerchiefed attendant in a bath sunken beneath city streets, living in a utilitarian gray apartment block, or why it would be any better than living in a place where she was known.

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He is not there. Fatima stands before the bath where she found him, his blood still pooling on the stones, the water running pink, the damp reminders of their bodies, but his body is gone. She walks pool to pool, thinking he could have slipped in, somehow, but no—there is nothing and no one, the pools are empty and quiet outside the water lapping over the steps.

The officers murmur behind her as she leaves the private baths, their radios crackle; she's frantic, not only to have found a dead man but then to have lost him. She pushes the door to the men's bath so hard it bounces back from the wall, but here too there is no one, no body curled beneath a bench or floating, shirt clouding around his torso, in the water.

"He's here," she says. "I left him there. He's here."

She catches shards of the officers' conversation. "Delirious—back to the station—you can't trust these ones—haven't been here in—"

Fatima runs from the men's bath back to the hall, to the women's bath, chest knotted. The officers follow her, catching the door as it swings shut behind her.

And there he is, standing on the other side of the pool, wringing his bloodied shirt, hair so dark she can no longer make out the patch of blood she tried to wash free.

"Here we go," one of the officers says. They round the pool together, pick up his shirt where he's dropped it on the floor. "What happened here? Yeah, I see some blood up there, all right." The man is quiet, his eyes downcast. The officers walk him around the pool, passing so close to Fatima that she could breathe in his sharp metallic tang—if only she could breathe. His skin does not look like skin.

She trails them down the hall, past the bath where a half-hour before the man lay dead, past her desk. He turns as he reaches the door and she wonders if he somehow remembers, if he knows. Before she can find the words, the door is glinting shut, he is crossing the empty parking lot with the officers. She follows them.

"We'll get him back to the hospital," the officer with the pen says, turning to Fatima. "We'll call you if we need more information. Looks like he'll be fine." Retreating to the door, she thinks she can hear the police laugh from the car, turning in the lot. She watches until the car is gone, the valley rolling itself out beneath her. She goes inside to wash the blood from her hands, her skirt drying in the laundry.

The next morning Fatima returns to find she forgot to lock the door. Anyone could have walked the blood-spoiled halls. To clean the private baths she has to drop a cover across the pipe that allows water to bubble in, watch the water drain for hours, then stand on the steps and scrub their walls with a long brush. The thought that anyone might have walked in and seen this . . . but they didn't—of course the bath sat empty all night, as it will sit empty all day; there was no one who could bear witness to what she did.

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Alban returns the next week. He leaves his Mercedes running in the parking lot, his wife and her silvery hair in the

passenger seat. Fatima hands him the guestbook so he can review the logs. He leans over his phone as he calculates that they have had six guests a day, a number Fatima could have told him if he would listen. The police still haven't called, and she doesn't tell him about the man.

He walks through the bath with her trailing, his hair reflecting the flickering lights. He stands for long minutes in the men's bath, the water milky and blending with the clouds caught motionless through the open roof. Finally he turns to her.

"My father says the police were here."

Fatima looks at his feet. "One of the customers hit his head. I phoned them to be safe."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

She looks up to his kneecaps then back down. "I didn't want to disturb you. He was fine. He walked home. Nothing was wrong."

"I can't be surprised by these things. You understand that?"

Fatima nods.

"I'll have to review the marketing again," he says, turning back to the door. "We should have thirty, forty people here a day. Not even locals? Who's coming?"

"Mostly locals," Fatima says.

He shakes his head, flips through the guestbook again as he leads Fatima back to the desk. "Well, we'll figure something out. Come to dinner while we're here, any night."

Fatima nods and sees him out. She stands in the door, watching him climb back next to his wife, a woman she has seen only through glass and whose gleaming hair and smooth skin hint at a life of impossible ease, a figure blinked into being. A man walks on the dirt road, a hitch in his gait suggesting something incorrect in his being. Fatima stands outside after Alban's car is gone and the dust settled, until she blinks again and the figure is gone.

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Fatima writes the date in the blue cloth guestbook, underlines it, and taps the pen as she waits for someone, anyone, to walk through the door. If it stays cool, if winter comes early, she expects more visitors: women with their children riding a hip, anyone in the village who wants a warm bath in the sight of the stone-gray

sky. This fall has been slow.

It is hours later when the man appears in the parking lot. Fatima has imagined his limbs stiff, his skin waxy to the touch. She has imagined him on the streets of Debar as a dead man, and now he is before her, crossing the dirt lot. He edges to the side of the door, stands at the window, looks in. It is bright outside and she's not sure if he can see her. He stays next to the window, not moving to enter. She is tempted to drop beneath the desk. Instead, she stands and walks to the door.

He is off the steps, a stiff-legged walk to the road, by the time she opens the door. "Hey!" she calls. "Who are you?" He turns. A glance and nothing more. She has imagined tracing his steps, finding where he has gone, standing at the gate to his home to find out what has become of him. For the first time she realizes he must have imagined the same thing; it is only that he, unlike her, has the power to go where he pleases. He can walk to her door, peer in, and maybe see her for what she is.

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Fatima sees the man everywhere now. She walks with her mother to visit the neighbors and sees his shadow stepping across the fields. She opens their gate to his back retreating down the street, hair gleaming in the sun. She walks to the store with her baba one day and he is at the counter, asking for a pack of cigarettes and a bag of bonbons in a voice filled with rocks. She walks to work and he is coming up the road, staring at her with eyes dug into the hollows of their sockets, clarifying into a face of skin and flesh, a real and correct thing, when she blinks the sun from her eyes. He must have a job, and she doesn't know how he is able to come to Banjishte every day; or maybe dead men don't have jobs. He finds her eyes, he stands in the dirt outside their gate, he waits in the parking lot and watches her at her desk, but still she is never quite sure that he knows who she is, that he remembers, that he knows what he is.

"I think Alban is sending that man," her mother says one evening when Fatima is home from work. "I saw him by the baths again. Has he been in? I think he's sending him to check on you."

"He hasn't been inside."

"Well, all the same." Her mother stands over the stove,

pulling a boiling pot of beans over to the cooler side of the cook-top. "Maybe you should think through how to bring in some more guests and work on that. Before he can report back."

"What can I do?" Fatima asks. "I have to stay in the baths all day and wait for them to come to me."

Her mother pretends not to hear the question. "It is what it is. See if you can find his name." She turns back to the stove and Fatima looks out the window, waiting for the man to walk through their gate, to wrench his body from her imagination and place it before her for inspection in the full light of day.

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It turns out that Alban has had his own ideas for how to increase the number of guests. The first Monday in October, Fatima unlocks the door and finds a gray computer sitting on the desk, her blue guestbook gone. There is no note or indication of what she's meant to do with this, and she nudges the mouse to reveal a digital version of the book, buttons urging her to register a new guest or record a purchased service. She has always used a cigar box for holding the money, and it sits in its same place under the desktop.

Alban appears at noon, emerging from his Mercedes, though he must have come only from his family's home, a five-minute walk. "Good, you're already testing this," he says when he sees Fatima's hunched shoulders, her squinting at the screen.

"It's easy, but there's a mistake. Look at all these entries." She points. "It says here that Lindita Hoxha from Debar came for a massage yesterday. And Saranda Karpuzi for a full Turkish bath, for a thousand denars, the day before."

"Don't worry about it. We'll need you sometimes to add an extra entry, here or there."

"Does this mean we can use the good brochures?" A box with a list of all the services they do not offer has sat beneath her feet for three years.

"Not yet." Alban closes the imagined Saranda's record. "Just—every night you can add a few more records. A massage or a full bath, you know."

He walks back to the check the baths, and Fatima reopens the records, adding up how much money the baths have claimed in earnings this past week. It is an impossible figure.

But maybe it is not such a strange thing, not for Alban and his pleather jacket and his car that drew stares all through the village when he first brought it home. He had worked at the baths as a boy, with the job of carrying towels to and from the men's pool. He enforced the time limits that were in place then, when the baths were popular. "My great innovation," he told Fatima on her first day at the baths, "was to tell them more than thirty minutes in the bath and they'd be infertile. None of them wanted to dare, not even the ones who were too old for it to matter. Of course," he added, "I don't want you to do that."

Only now he does; he wants her to follow in the story he is crafting for this place, to join him in his lies and, she supposes, in whatever he might be hiding with them. She opens a new record and types in a visit for a Valbona Kastrati and her family, who luxuriated in baths, facials, massages. Blinking behind the computer screen is a version of her who has performed each of these services, who has made Valbona's family so happy that they will return the next week, and the next, and the one after that. She saves the record. When she looks up the man is at the door, watching her.

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A late October snowstorm leaves its tracks across the village overnight. Fatima stands in the door, watching thick flakes drifting across the courtyard. "I'm not going to the baths today," she tells her mother when she finds her. Alban won't know any different, she thinks, and she spends the morning darning her baba's gray wool socks.

Just before lunch, Fatima kneeling at the stove to check the progress of the baking rice, her mother creaks through the door. "Tima!" she hisses. "You need to get dressed."

Fatima gestures to the rice. "But it's almost —"

"We have visitors, be quick — your baba is walking them in."

Her mother stands before her as she crosses the hall, anxiety passing off her in waves. "And put on some makeup," she whispers, pulling the door shut just as a woman in a blue headscarf steps inside.

Fatima's stomach twists as she stares at her four dresses. She steps into the green crepe one she wore when Alban's mother visited, but the zipper catches below her waist. She lets it puddle at

her feet, pulls on a white button-up shirt of her mother's, steps out of the dress, kneels and lifts the sofa's seat to find the box that was meant to be part of her trousseau and finds a pale yellow bra. She can hear them murmuring from the other room, one of the voices too deep, as she snaps the tag free. Takes off the shirt, changes bras, buttons the shirt. She shakes her left hand at her side as she fingers through her mother's skirts, hangers clicking. Blue poplin, wool. She holds her breath as she zips and buttons the skirt and tucks her fingers under the band to rotate it. She stabs her right eye with the mascara wand, leaning close to the speckled mirror in its plastic frame, sucks at her fingers to rub away fragments of makeup that have ashed across her cheeks.

"There she is!" her mother says when Fatima opens the door. She pushes until it clicks shut behind her, prepares her smile before turning to the room. "Fatima, this is Liljana Ivanovska, and this is her son Adem. They've come all the way from Debar."

"Oh!" Fatima does not look to the man but walks to his mother, who leans up from the sofa so Fatima can take her hand. She kisses the woman's right cheek, then her left. She holds her eyes on the floor as she takes the man's hand. It feels like a hand that could be alive.

"They were just telling us how much they enjoy the baths here. Isn't that wonderful?"

"Oh," Fatima repeats. "Yes." She nods, swallows, smiles to the woman, who is tucking a strand of black hair beneath her scarf. "Would anyone like a coffee?"

Her mother follows her to the hall. "Have you forgotten how to talk?" she whispers, clattering coffee cups to a tray. Fatima shakes her head. She steps outside before her mother can continue, filling the *xbeve* at the tap. She shuts her eyes until the water splashes over her fingers, the shock of ice. She imagines his body rotting within itself, an emptiness opening beneath his eyes, lips pulling in around his teeth, the skin back from his nails.

"Was it safe for you to come all this way in the snow?" she asks the woman when she returns to the room. She sets the *xbeve* on the stove and dries her hand before reaching for the coffee tin.

"We took a taxi, and for Adem it's important we come." The woman looks to her son. Fatima glances at him too, then back to the coffee canister. She can almost see the scar at his hairline; so, that is like life.

“You know,” Fatima’s mother says, “Tima is an accomplished girl. Such a help to us, with her work at the baths, and she makes the best bread in the family.”

“Do you like your work, then?” He speaks like a man who is alive, though pebbles crumble beneath his words.

Fatima spoons the ground coffee into the *xbesve*, where it sits on the water’s tight surface. “It’s interesting.” She watches the grounds begin to drop into the warming water and stirs. They are watching her. “I’m happy that I can help my family, of course.” She thinks of what else she could say that would be safe, but nothing is there. Her ideas for how they could market the baths, the thought of the hotel full of guests from Skopje, her walking in a starched white uniform from room to room, kneading tight muscles into repose; but she doesn’t want them to think she sees so much in herself. “Would you like sugar in your coffee?”

Fatima watches the coffee foam, lifting it above the stove a moment to settle, returning it to the heat to rise a second time. She holds her breath as she pours the coffee into the cups, eyes down as she serves.

“Very good,” Liljana says. “If her cooking is as good as her coffee. . . .” She looks to Fatima’s mother.

Fatima searches for activities to last the visit. She finds cookies and arranges them on a tray. She serves them first to Liljana, then Adem, then her baba and mother. She drinks her coffee; she collects the cups and carries them outside; she finds a bottle of fizzing Pelisterka and serves the water. She cannot bring herself to watch the man, Adem. She is sure that he cannot eat. That if she looked at his face she would find the water dripping down his chin, the dribble of a cookie he has masticated but found himself unable to swallow.

When she has run out of tasks Fatima looks to her hands, clasping them in new configurations as the women talk around them. She hears her father calling from the courtyard. The women go to join him, leaving Fatima and Adem alone with the door open. The stove’s warmth streams from the room, but Fatima finds herself sweating, flicking eyes up to Adem’s.

His skin has a gray cast, but he moves and smiles like a man who is alive. She thinks he must be near thirty, crow’s feet beginning to stretch free at the corners of his eyes. He has a face that is

friendly, even handsome, with its sharp, thin nose, his black eyes—if not for his being dead. He moves closer to her when everyone is gone.

“Do you remember me?”

Fatima looks into his eyes. “You’re always in the village. I see you everywhere.”

“But from before. Do you remember meeting?”

His eyes are so brown they are almost black. She nods.

“Probably I should have sent my mother. It’s too much for me to be here, I think. I should have let you decide.”

Fatima wants to reach out and touch him. To feel this thing she has created. She imagines laying a hand on his chest and feeling him living beneath her touch. She shakes her head. “It’s not bad,” she says. She can hear them talking outside. “It’s good you came.”

He reaches out and lays a hand on top of her own. It is warm and dry. He has dirt under his square nails. They jump apart when the voices draw closer; her father comes to shake Adem’s hand. Fatima shakes his hand again when he and his mother leave. She is startled by its warmth, its solidity.

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“I should check the baths,” Fatima says before dinner, after snow has settled and smoothed the man’s prints across the courtyard. “Just to be safe.” She changes so as not to ruin her mother’s good clothes and walks slowly through the silent village. “Just a quick check,” she whispers as she unlocks the fogged doors. She passes the private baths, glances through the window into the men’s bath. She walks into the women’s bath, where she lets herself stand next to the pool. A crushed shampoo bottle lies forgotten under one of the benches.

She bends to the water and runs her hand through its enveloping warmth. Fatima can’t remember the last time she bathed here. She stands, steps from her skirt, shimmies free of her piled sweater, unhooks the yellow bra. She folds her clothes on the bench and walks into the pool, holding the rail as she slips from one shallow step to the next. She can walk all the way across the pool, water at her chest, and stop in the middle to look at the open

sky. In this empty space, alone, she can almost believe that whatever happened with the man was not what she thought; that he was concussed, asleep, that nothing was what she thought it had been. That nothing is what she thinks it is, that here is a courtship and a future, a life.

Fatima lets the water carry her onto her back and lies there under the graying day, stars nearly ready to emerge from the light only to be buried above the sifting snow. It lands on her tongue and eyelids. It is cold and sharp on her skin. She holds out her arms and shuts her eyes, waits for it to cover her. The water is a warm pulse at her back. She wants to walk a guest through these baths, room to room, with nothing more in her mind than the muscle and will in her own hands. She wants to think she is a person who wouldn't marry a dead man for no better reason than that he is handsome, that she is too old, that she needs to lock this secret tight within the walls of their home.

She floats until the length of her is coated by snow, then flips and paddles to the pool's edge. She opens her eyes to the eddy of water beneath her spread fingers. The water feels cooler, but maybe it is just the snow—or her. She climbs from the pool, steps across the slick chill of the stone, watches the snow and the water while she dries. Her skin bursts into thousands of angry red bumps and water tracks down her back. The pool, the mist lifting itself above the waters, the snow winking out of life, all of it is gone as she pulls her sweater over the cold drip of her hair.