

ELLEN RHUDY

*You Women in the Mountains*

The man wore a fluorescent orange vest and carried a white hard-hat under one arm. We told him to wait outside while Alma went for Bogdana. It had been decades since a man had set foot in the monastery, and his presence on the graveled parking lot, the stones squeaking beneath his boots, stirred something in me. I watched as he smoked a cigarette, his hand curled to protect it from the rain, and listened for footsteps on the flagged courtyard.

“Mother won’t allow it,” Bogdana said. She told the man to leave. She directed him to villages he said they had already considered or explored, places that were farther from the work.

“It’s an emergency,” he said, “if you might reconsider.” But she shook her head and with her gloved hand retrieved his cigarette butt, nearly lost between the stones.

He left, we reentered the grounds, I said I needed the toilet, I slipped back to the drive and down the turnings of our road. Three avalanches had already come that week, leaving me with the sense that the earth might simply yawn away beneath my booted feet. The man’s vest broke occasionally through the dark, more of a feeling than a thing I could see. What I wanted was to see the slip of mud washed over the once-black band of road, the tangled saplings and the lost roots of the spring’s new plantings. Things had been unsettled inside the monastery, with Mother hidden away and trusting Bogdana to supervise as we did our chores, crocheted doilies for souvenirs. Bogdana telling us not to worry as I watched dewdrops vanish from Alma’s forearms, wicked away by the fire’s heat.

I was sure the man would look back to me when he arrived at the main road, but instead he turned to his left, where the utterances of men rose and fell. I went in the other direction, past an empty white van trapped in mud halfway up its wheels. The road lifted in new ways.

Footsteps marred the landslide’s surface, scattering in and out of my flashlight’s view. A single boot, lodged. A flurry of sodden plastic bags, pink and yellow and powder blue. At the far end of the avalanche were the orange markings of the construction equipment

whose faint grumbles had lain beneath our day. Rain spat against my forehead, and, whatever the men did, there would be no stopping more layers of the mountain from sluicing free. A thing I tried to unknow as I walked along the dense pound of the river, which foamed nearly to the level of the buried road.

I halted when the monastery's spare lights had gone out of view. The only sounds were the rustlings of the trees, the water, my own breath. In the mud a stilled tangle of black clutched a tree trunk. It was the bear that often roamed outside our kitchen, searching for potato scraps or eggshells or discarded hunks of gristle. He was only a few years old; and yet here he was, fur rough and cold to my touch. We had often fought over whether to kill him, or drive him away, or let him be. Now it was decided, and he would be lifted into an earthmover and trucked away. I knelt at his side.

His face was slack and almost monastic. Calm. He smelled of ozone, mushrooms, iron. My father once told me a story about a woman who could become a bear. As a bear, she would roam the fields around her village. The story didn't have a purpose or a conclusion that I remembered, just this lone image of a woman padding across the tilled dirt. Later, before I came to Bigorski, he confessed his regret that he had told me so many stories about the minor freedoms of women. I tried to pull this bear's paw free from the trunk, and when that failed I retrieved the blue-handled paring knife I often carried in my apron pocket. I dug into his first digit with its blade. Probing the point around his joint, my hands muddy and slick. The toe broke loose with a faint sucking pop, surprising me. His claw was cool and smooth when I rubbed away the dirt.

At the monastery, I placed the toe in a box and slid it beneath my bed. In the chapel we had the finger of a saint whose name I'd forgotten: a narrow, bleached bone. I liked the thought of the bear's toe, in its natural decline, set alongside the saint's. The thought that a century from now someone would enter the chapel and wonder what type of man had left this part of himself behind, then realize it had been no man at all. For now, though, it would remain with me.

The dormitory was quiet, all the women motionless in their beds, the narrow slant of the moon cutting the floor. For a breath I thought the earth had moved around us, then realized it was only Bogdana's halfhearted snores, flecking and catching in her throat.

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“The phone lines are down,” Bogdana said when our normal deliveries didn’t appear. The couple who brought our food—the wife would enter while her husband sat in their idling truck—lived only in Rostuche, an easy trip even with the avalanches. Bogdana herself couldn’t walk to the village due to her back but would send some of the other women. “Not you,” she said to me.

She said the same to Alma. It had been a week since Mother had left her rooms, a week since anyone but Bogdana had seen her. We had asked to bring her a meal, to bring her some poultices. Asked to call a doctor. Something in our actions had displeased Mother, or maybe—I could not say this—displeased only Bogdana herself. From the parking lot I watched the women turn down the hill with their empty packs, trying to think how to fill my day, trying not to feel anger that I’d been left behind. I had been at Bigorski twelve years, since I was sixteen. Far longer than most of those women.

Within the hour, though, it began to rain again, and my regret faded. Fat drops spattering the windows as Alma and I kneaded dough in the kitchen, the air ripe with yeast. Bogdana didn’t believe in salting our food, having identified it as a needless luxury, but we’d added a spare palmful to the flour. She would notice, and it would be one more mark against us. Besides the bread we had onions, cabbage, potatoes, beans. Enough to see us through if the women came back with nothing, or if there was nothing to bring.

“We should have welcomed the men,” Alma said. “In a time of need.”

We agreed to explore the spare dormitory while the dough rose. How long since it had been opened? The door scraped the floor, curls of dust gathered at its base. The lights had been disconnected years earlier, so we opened the windows to see. A panic of fluttering moths, rough wool blankets riddled with holes. A dozen beds lined the walls, each with a narrow set of drawers at its side. It could be made comfortable, I thought, it wasn’t so much work. There had been a time, not a half-century ago, when this room was peopled by monks, and maybe this was why it was so easy to imagine for the men. A fire, clean sheets. Mother had seized the monastery during its temporary abandonment, after a fire had made Bigorski a wick that lit the hillside, after the monks had receded to allow the buildings’ repair, and maybe this was why it felt so easy now to imagine men into this space. Maybe it had only been waiting for them all along.

We propped the windows to air, carried the blankets to the laundry. Bogdana was nowhere as we worked, the other women re-appearing only after we had strung the blankets in the dining hall, steam wisping from those nearest the fire.

They hadn't learned anything, they reported. Only the village had been empty; that was, no one had appeared when they knocked at their doors. No one had been on the road. The prodavnitsa had been locked, its lights off. Alma and I recalled the bread and ducked through the rain to the kitchen, where we found the loaves swollen in their round pans. "Let Bogdana complain," Alma said as we slid them into the oven, neither of us wanting to punch down the loaves, reform them, wait for another rise.

When we returned, Bogdana stood fingering a blanket. "What's this?" she asked.

"It isn't right for the men to be left out there," Alma said. "When they're only trying to clear the road. We should take a vote." A new idea to me, though I stood at her side.

"Especially with no one in Rostuche to help them," I said.

"We're founded on charity," one of the women said.

"It's a simple thing," said another.

"We don't vote." Bogdana stood behind Alma. "We aren't a democracy. I spoke with Mother, and she disapproved of the men."

The other women, though, continued to speak. They had seen the village, and they had seen the state of the road. The men would have to work for weeks to clear the avalanche, and they had to choose between driving the hour to Debar or Gostivar, or sleeping outdoors in danger and cold. "If we allow them here," one of the women said, "think how much faster they can clear and things can return to normal."

That Bogdana allowed us to vote seemed, in that moment, an act of kindness. But maybe she only recognized the movement of the women and hoped to tally us before it had gone too far. Seven would allow the men, five would not, and Bogdana did not vote, though we knew where she fell.

"Fine," she said. "But when we don't have enough food to feed ourselves, let alone our guests, remember who brought you this idea."

A victory. Alma and I felt it that way, and were so caught in ourselves that we forgot the over-proofed loaves until blackened and split crusts were added to their list of faults.

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The rain had stopped by the time the men carried their bags to our door, though the air remained saturated with its potential. Alma and I showed them to the dormitory and, when they thanked us for our generosity, Alma only said, "It isn't my generosity," before leaving. I could never account for her moods. I apologized that the blankets were still drying, that there were no lights. I showed them to the outhouse and the tap and the dining hall.

For dinner, we served *tavche gravche* and the ruined loaves. I was by now accustomed to the limitations of Bogdana's kitchen, could focus on the creamy bite of the beans rather than their absent seasoning. The men's faces, though, remained focused and bland as they ate, and they lit their cigarettes before the bowls were cleared or the crumbs swept from the tables. That they hadn't enjoyed the food was clear in their postures, and I found myself unable to look away as they laughed with each other and stubbed their cigarettes in the coffee cups we had brought. Wanting to understand how we looked to them, maybe. The stories they would take home when they left us.

Mother would have said it didn't matter. The only thing that mattered, ever, was what we made of ourselves. Most women needed men to define their lives, she said; we did not. This was why Bogdana hadn't wanted the men among us, I thought as we guided them back to their dormitory. I watched the women: maybe they carried themselves differently, in the distance they covered with each step, in the way they were folded slightly smaller than they had been. But then the men were in their dormitory, and we were alone in clearing the tables and washing the dishes. Bogdana left us to check on Mother, and then came the oddest sensation underfoot, as though the earth were trying to shift itself free of some encumbrance. The fourth avalanche swallowed another slope from the hillside, undoing everything that had been done.

I retrieved the bear's toe the next morning, when the men had gone to assess the latest aspects of our disaster and the other women were cleaning their quarters. The toe hadn't yet begun its disintegration. Instead it seemed somehow more complete or attuned to its new life as a religious relic. The fur had smoothed, it had grown lighter

than my memory. The cut was so well concealed that I might not have thought the toe ever a part of something larger, though it still held the bear's scents: dirt, musk. I should place it in the chapel, I thought. I should place it somewhere others could see. The thought of Bogdana was all that stopped me, and I slid the boxed toe back beneath my bed.

We had arrived at Sveti Bigorski in the same year, both brought by families that sensed some essential unfitness for our intended lives. This was how I'd thought of it, not a phrasing I ever shared; it had been an easy idea to forget when I felt how many weights shifted free of me within these walls. In Bogdana's case—and it took me years to learn this—she had been married, and for nearly a year she had lived in her husband's home before being given back to her family. For another year she had lived with her parents, awaiting the call to return. We were the same age, and while I had known girls in my own village who were married so young, I was meant to finish school, maybe even go to university. It was only a chance sighting outside the secondary school in Tetovo that had placed me here: a neighbor from Jepishte who saw me, maybe the incline of my body toward Valbona Karpuzi too familiar, or the touch of my hand, the way I liked to catch her around her waist, my specific mistake a thing I had never worked out. I suspected Bogdana had learned something in that year of marriage, about managing her mother-in-law—some lesson she had failed to understand in time but could now put to use on Mother. Even before the men left for the road, before we had finished breakfast, she was in Mother's chambers with the windows shut tight.

I found Alma beating a carpet in one of the glimpses between rain, sweat pebbling her forehead as she worked. "She must be dying," I said, not quite meaning it—only meaning that she must be hot in that closed room. It was no good for an ill person to be kept so warm, stifling.

"But with the rain." Alma wiped back her hair.

"Maybe." I took her broom and hit the carpet a few times. Enjoying the puffs of dust that emerged with each swing. "But do you really think she's in there?"

Alma hesitated to meet my eyes. "Of course she is."

"Then why don't we visit her?"

"We can't disturb her." She reached for the broom. "She needs to be allowed her rest. If she sees us, she'll see our concerns—she'll

take them on.”

This might be true, I agreed. When the rain began again, I helped Alma carry the carpet indoors and spread it over the floor. For most of the women here, it was impossible to imagine any other life for them, but Alma, I thought, would leave us and do well after she had gone. I left while she was occupied smoothing the carpet. I crossed the courtyard—past the empty chapel—to Mother’s quarters. A flight of stairs led to her room, which with its windows open would overlook the monastery’s courtyard. I knocked, I spoke Bogdana’s name, I knocked again. Visitors had always been welcome before, but now some caution seemed warranted.

The air was so close it demanded an open window—but worse than that, the smell. None of the scents of a sick chamber, pus and rust and bile. The room had the sweet-sick smell of the butcher shop my grandparents had once owned. Only worse than that, because here the scent had been allowed to linger and settle, to continue its progression. Mother lay with the covers pulled to her chin, her eyes milky and dissolving toward the ceiling. Flies orbited her head. This was all I needed to see, more than I needed to see—but what it meant—I backed from the room, pulling the door shut, and held to my knees as I tried not to retch.

“I told you not to visit.” Bogdana, on the stairs. She offered her hand and I took it. We stood the same height, though she was two steps below me.

“We have to prepare a proper funeral,” I said. The room’s scent wormed its way beneath the door, or maybe was only lodged too deep in my own breath. “We have to bury her. Why haven’t you buried her?”

Bogdana still held my hand. “Everyone would leave, if they knew. You don’t think, if we told the women, a single one would stay?”

“They can’t leave,” I said. I imagined Bogdana visiting Mother’s body, keeping this from us. “There must be rites—”

“I didn’t have a choice.” She lifted a hand to her forehead, let it fall. “Once the avalanches are clear, how long would it be before you abandoned me? A day? A few days?”

She walked down the steps and I followed. The rain had begun again, the stones staining darker gray, and I imagined it wouldn’t be long now before more of the mountain collapsed down to the road. The men had felt like a temporary thing when Alma argued for their

stay, but for the first time I realized they might be here longer, for weeks or months. That they might come to feel like a permanent fixture of our home rather than the interlopers they were. And if they learned about Mother—this, then, must be how Bogdana justified holding it to herself.

“How long has it been?”

Bogdana pressed me down to the bench ledge that ran around the courtyard. Once, we’d had peacocks. They had been a good attraction for the tourists—good for photographs. Perched on this same ledge, tailfeathers draping the ground.

“A week.”

One week. What had happened in the last week? The avalanches, the bear, the men. Time was meant to move slower, or maybe it was building on its momentum and would move faster and faster until events unspooled hopelessly before us. “You have to tell them,” I repeated, though the certainty had leached from my words.

“She wasn’t even sick.” Bogdana sat next to me, speaking quietly so none of the women in the yard could overhear. They ran through the rain, smoke drifted from the kitchen.

“Just because it’s a shock—”

“I was meant to take her place,” Bogdana said, “but not yet. Would you stay, if it were just me?”

No, I thought. But in truth I wasn’t sure. I could, I thought, walk to the roadside and sit until a kombi heading for the capitol passed. I could return to Tetovo and stand in the bright yellow lights of a supermarket. I could sit in a café and drink a coffee, like that, surrounded by strangers. But I couldn’t imagine any further than this. My family wouldn’t allow the shame of my return to Jepishte, I had no friends, I had none of the skills or personal connections required for even a simple job stocking the shelves of that glaring supermarket. Over the past decade I hadn’t allowed myself even to imagine a life for my family, and I understood it was better to let them all go on as they’d been.

Bogdana smiled a small smile.

“It isn’t right to leave her there like that,” I said. “And the women—they’ll begin to tell. I mean, her body will tell. They’ll realize.”

“Where would you bury her?”

As she spoke I imagined the ground shifting again beneath us, though in fact it would be another half-day before the next av-



alanche. I allowed myself to believe it was only the instability of the ground that had delayed Bogdana from action. “Why not the orchard?” One day a tree might grow from Mother’s embrace.

That night, when the men returned, they told us about the bear—how it had nearly gone unnoticed as they shifted the earth. “All kinds of animals in there,” said one of the men, the first one who had come to us. He did not speak of any of the others, though, and we did not ask.

I had saved some of their cigarette butts, the larger ones, and the next night walked to the chapel alone to smoke them. They all tasted stale, a little like my pocket.

“Do you want one?”

It was the first man. He had seen me walking away, he said, and was curious. The others had all gone to sleep. He still wore his fluorescent jacket and it flared when he struck a match. Cigarettes were the sort of unclean item not allowed on the monastery grounds, but it was a minor vice when I considered all the others.

“This is eerie,” he said, after lighting his own. He gestured to the walls, where the saints looked down on us. Saints with birds, saints with dogs, saints with children, all with their eyes scratched away. In daylight, only the bare wall would fill their sockets.

“I find it peaceful.” I told him how normally tourists crowded the chapel, which he must have known—if he lived anywhere in the region, the women of his family had paid their fifty denars to see us perform our imagined rituals. Even at night the chapel retained some aspect of their commotion, I said. It was hard to find peace at any time of the day.

“I don’t guess we’re allowed to smoke in here.”

“No.”

“You know what they say about you women, in Tetovo?”

“I used to.”

“Witches,” he said. “Anything unfortunate that happens, to anyone—oh, they must have wronged you in some way. You up here in the mountains.”

This wasn’t so far from what I had heard when I was a child. It was the idea I had held to when my father arranged with Mother for my seclusion, when he had determined this was the only route to preserve our family’s good name. Even when I was old enough to

know better I thought there must be some unspoken power in these walls, though the power, of course, wasn't in the construction. It was in Mother, who opened her arms where others wouldn't, whose love I sought like a benediction.

"Should we tell them the truth?" he asked. "When we go back? Or would you prefer the story remain?"

I considered. I had forgotten the cigarette as we spoke and found its ember smothered when I thought to check. Lit a second time, it tasted as stale as all the others. "What will you tell them, if you tell the truth?"

"That you're just a group of lonely women," he said, "who don't need to be so lonely."

I let his words settle to the cool stone beneath my feet. "That's what you men always think," I said. "That wherever you aren't, we feel your lack." I stood and waited for him to follow so I could close the chapel behind us. Something pathetic in the damp slope of his shoulders beneath the moon.

The sixth and seventh avalanches arrived on the same day. The eighth, a day later. Even when the rain stopped, it remained so warm that the snowpack from the mountains continued to swell the river. The men said tree limbs were getting caught in the water and forcing it over the banks. Another disaster they would attempt to manage. It was barely mid-March, but I felt as though the world had decided to progress without us, to plant itself firmly in summer, whatever the consequences.

The women went as far as Debar for food, taking the kombi that ran between the town and the avalanche. There were still no signs from Rostuche, but I could make out people walking along the dirt-laden road. In their black jackets, they were more a sense of motion than actual figures. They carried their bags from the Debar kombi, across the avalanche. What could be so important, I wondered, that they were willing to cross such unstable land? The men seemed equally unconcerned, as if I were the only person who pictured the next slide burying not just trees and animals and the road but all the people who spent their days crossing or clearing that vein of land.

"We're running short on food," Bogdana announced one evening, before the men returned. Alma and I knew as much, having

tilted and scraped the last from our sack of flour that afternoon, but had hesitated to tell Bogdana—after all, the men had been our idea. We were bringing in no money, Bogdana said, and the Dashi Mart in Debar had raised its prices again. “Remember that this wouldn’t have been my solution,” she said when ordering our restricted rations to ensure the men had enough to eat. The women who had voted against their admittance clustered as we served the men meals that—they must be saying—were rightfully ours.

“I don’t want to divide us,” Bogdana said when I asked why she was doing just that. The ninth avalanche came that night, and the next morning even the men seemed disturbed. Serving breakfast, I felt as though an electric current had been fixed to my body, as though there were a vein of energy threading my exhaustion, sparking into motion objects and lights that turned out not to be there when I tried to look at them more directly. The men left, and Alma and I cleared the tables with the help of only two women. The other three had stepped outside with Bogdana and the rest, and we strained to hear as we stacked plates.

“How many avalanches did we have last year?” Bogdana asked when we emerged, as though Alma and I possessed some rare ability for tracking the earth’s movements. We looked at each other. Two? One? None? “After lunch we’ll take a vote,” she said, and when I looked back, the two women were gone. Somehow they had left us.

“What can they vote on?” Alma asked. We sat with our skirts folded around our knees, feet resting bare on the stones. “And why vote at all? It’s not a democracy, she said.”

“It isn’t.” I rested my forehead on my knees. A self-supporting posture, an entire world between my breath and the pleats of my skirt. “They’ll vote to send us out, they’ll say it’s our fault.”

Alma rested her hand between my shoulder blades. Not moving her hand, only holding it. “Do we have something for dinner?”

“There’s the beans. And cabbage.” Liters of safflower oil. “I know something,” I said, “that would stop them voting with Bogdana.”

Alma lifted her hand but didn’t speak until I had raised my head. “What?”

It felt wrong to speak it. That was the only reason I led her there, to Mother’s room, to see for herself. Words were a thing that could not be drawn back once spoken, and maybe I only didn’t want the responsibility of having made this death true. Our Sveti Bigorski

had never been without Mother, and to go forward without her—

I remained on the steps. The air draping my shoulders, my chest, pinning me to the ground with its heat and the sun, the humidity. And then Alma cried out and I watched my hands, how the cuticles edged raggedly onto the nails, as I waited.

“How long have you known?” she asked. Pushing past me so she stood in the courtyard, arms wrapping her chest.

I was tempted to lie but arrived at the truth. “Only four days.”

“Four days.” Alma’s face was pale and pricked with sweat. “You have to bring her out,” she said. “You have to let the others see.”

“Not until we can bury—”

“No,” she said. “I don’t want to keep your secret. I won’t keep your secret.”

“It’s not my secret,” I said. She was already gone, though, crossing the yard. I spoke to her back and she gave no sign of having heard.

Visitors, when they had come, always asked the same questions. Did we consider ourselves friends, and did we stay busy, and were we able to see our families. Were we satisfied. They wanted to understand the contours of our lives, to understand if we felt any of the lacks people had so often identified for us. They didn’t care how we answered, generally. I could see it when we spoke, how they would take these answers and rework them as the mangled worldviews of women with no other options. But when they left I remained here, with Alma—that was the thing they couldn’t see, that we did have something genuine here, that our order wasn’t only about absenting ourselves from their world but also about creating something new. Something to stand in opposition. Though with Alma’s back to me, ducking into the kitchen and then emerging minutes later with the other women, her face pinched and skin blotched red across her forehead and cheeks, this world of only a month past felt as far from me as anything ever had.

I had made a mistake, I saw. Only I wasn’t sure what else I should have done. “Bring her out,” Alma said, the women at her side. Bogdana alone stood apart.

“I don’t—”

“Bring her out,” she repeated.

I didn’t want to. I didn’t want to. How many times could I say this? I whispered the words as I climbed the stairs, scarf drawn

across my face. Mother's flesh looked ripe, flies spun through the room's tight air, her knit blanket damp with excretions. I lifted the blanket from her, folded it, tried to shift it beneath the body without touching her skin. Liquid seeped from her eyes and the corners of her mouth, and I gazed up to the shuttered window as I lifted her. She was lighter than I expected; she fit neatly in my arms. The door had drifted shut behind me, and I had to hold her closer, flies spitting against my turned face, as I nudged it back open with my foot.

Outside, in the full light, her skin was mottled. Her wrinkles gone, her face swollen. But I didn't want to see—truly, the only thing I wanted was not to see. I laid her in the courtyard, trying not to let my face near her own as I lowered her to the ground. The women crowded closer as I stepped back, touching her face, her hair, tugging the blankets back to reach for the greening flesh of her hands. Bogdana and I stayed distant from each other, opposing magnets, even as we were the only women not to surround Mother, even as our eyes locked to each other's when their cries rose.

"Her hand," one of the women said, and then the others echoed, their voices clattering against one another, ringing from the stones. When they drew away, the blanket was laid around Mother, her arms across her chest, they wanted us to see—to explain—they drew us close—her left hand, the index finger absent where it should have met the palm.

"What did you do?" Alma asked, and I shook my head, reaching for her hand, for anyone's hand, and finding only Bogdana's as I leaned closer to Mother. Her finger was gone, though there was nothing like a wound. The skin only closed over itself, and if we hadn't known Mother in life we would have thought the finger was lost long before death.

"It's time we bury Mother," Alma said. "It's time we let her rest."

The women gathered around Mother, folding the blanket over her form. I reached a hand to her as she was lifted, to feel her one last time, and Alma stepped in my path. "Not you," she said. "Not you," she said to Bogdana. She walked but turned, watching us, as they carried Mother to the orchard, to the burial I'd imagined. I wanted the skies to slip back open, to force this moment shut. They only held still above Bogdana and me, though, the sun scattering through the clouds and dappling the courtyard.

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The men brought ground beef when they returned up the mountain, and onions and flour. They brought a bag of coffee and another of sugar. "You thought we didn't see," they said, but of course they had seen. They stacked cartons of cigarettes on a table, dividing them among themselves.

"We arranged it with the driver," the first man told me. Sliding a pack of cigarettes into my pocket, its soft packet creasing beneath my fingers. He laughed as he described the kombi from Debar, the driver opening his door to a spill of groceries in their yellow bags. One hand in my pocket, I watched him that night as he hunched over his meal, lit one cigarette off another, raised a coffee cup of rakija to the other men. He had no idea what had taken place that afternoon, none of them did, none of them could. Three more avalanches slipped across our mountains that night, slight collapses, and when I stepped into the courtyard after serving dinner, I was surprised to find the cold night wrapping itself around me, my breath spooling before my face.

"We've taken a vote," Alma said.

I faced the faint cloud of her words. "We?"

"The other women. We've taken a vote. You should go."

"And I don't have a vote, any say?" She didn't answer. "And what about Bogdana?"

"She'll leave as well."

I walked away before I could speak. What I wanted to say but knew would have no use: Democratic systems were bound for failure, even if Alma was only enacting these votes as a gesture. That none of them had been here long enough, that none of them knew Bigorski's history, that none of them had known Mother the way Bogdana or I had known her. That without us, without me, Alma would fail, and I would be happy to see it. I would rejoice.

Outside the chapel, I sat and turned the cigarettes in my hands. The man had not thought to give me a lighter or matches, but I held one above my lip and breathed its scent. This is what the world smells like, I told myself, though it only reminded me of hay—of horses. I tried to draw out the things I would do, set free, and tried to find any pleasure in them; but what type of pleasure could be found in a woman, near thirty, with no money, sitting alone in a café?

Bogdana wasn't outside, hadn't been in the dining hall, wasn't in the dormitory where I knelt and packed my bag. Only a dress, several pairs of underwear, two scarves. None of the women, when I returned to the dining hall, would meet my eye. I sat at the end of the men's table, accepted a glass of rakija and ignored their laughter as I tilted it to my lips. Alma glancing and turning away; the air dense with cigarettes, the fire spitting against its grating, the table rough beneath my fingers. "I had to do it," she would tell me in the morning, with the air of an apology as she explained how the men would also be leaving, like this was a comfort. "I couldn't risk it being me. I couldn't leave." But she could have. She could have chosen to hold me closer, could have chosen that risk.

In the morning, I thought, I would walk down the mountain. I would pick my way over the mounding dirt drawn over the road. I would see the man in his vest, I would wave, I would tell him where I was going and I would ask his name, his family's name. "Show me where you found the bear," I would say, and "Tell me how long the work will go." I would stand at the northern edge of the avalanche, and when a kombi came I would tell them I was bound for Tetovo, and I would watch the snow-drifted trees fade from my side until we reached the city where I would tell the driver I could not pay. Maybe I would walk the fields around Jepishte, or ask after my family that had never asked after me, or sit in a café, or mold my body along the crowded sidewalks, or only hold myself still until the man in his vest arrived, climbing from a van with his hat tucked beneath one arm. I would whisper deprecations against Alma, or against Bogdana, or against all of them; I would lift the bear's toe from its box and fold it in my palm, the slender bone of a saint, a talisman I would not ever share. I would tell to people all the things they wished to hear. I might do any of these things, I thought, and I might do more. Only first I had to name this room a place I no longer wished to be and turn from its guttering flame—only first I had to make this one thing true.