Unraveling

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Unraveling

by

Anna Elaine Ossanna

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
MASTER OF ARTS

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Program of Study Committee
Barbara Haas, Major Professor
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has met the thesis requirements of Iowa State University

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Major Professor

__________________________________________
For the Major Program
One

The town of Kalevala Bay was nestled in a small inlet on Lake Superior, just south of where a river’s falls cut through granite and then drained into the big water through a wide, slow mouth. A local map would call this river the Fischer, but people here knew it as Tuonela, after the river in the Kalevala that separated the living and the dead. The Tuonela’s course was shallow and winding, heading south before the tilt of receding glaciers shifted its path around the hill on which the town was built. A single highway cut through it, crossing the river twice, so that to anyone passing through it seemed an island. Kalevala Bay was unremarkable when seen from the highway. Gas stations, fast food, a sign for a business district two blocks east that consisted of Main Street and Water Street. Five avenues radiated through the downtown, spreading out from the lake’s concave shoreline like the fingers of a hand. Only two landmarks stood out. To the east, Lake Superior stretched out to the horizon. And just north of town, on a hill across the Tuonela River, was the hanging tree.

The tree, a wind-weathered oak, grew from soilless granite. Roots like gnarled muscles clung to bald rock, slipping into cracks and crevices that some said reached to the water table one hundred feet below. From the town’s earliest days, there were stories of men who used the tree to put an end to their sorrow. Only one man who went there returned, carrying the body of another who’d gone before him; someone else would find his body later. Homesick in a land that looked punishingly familiar, an inverse world appearing similar to the one from which they came but stripped of the people who made it home, they went to the
tree so regularly that swinging bodies rising above the shore-bound trees were as perennial as frost. The people of Kalevala Bay cut them loose and paid respects. The ones they found there were commended for their courtesy. Anyone could succumb to sorrow. It took character and consideration to do this with the least disruption. There would be no need for searches or clean-up. No parts to retrieve from the forest where animals had dragged them. And no production to endure, either, like those in cities who jumped from skyscrapers, drawing crowds into their last act of regret. Here, there was patience for those who knew darkness, but none for those who rose too far above the crowd.

When the town’s taconite plant closed in the nineteen-eighties, people worried that the tree might be put to use again, but it wasn’t. Instead, those who couldn’t make it just moved on. The population shifted from young to old, save a few, like Aino Saarinen and her husband Len, who couldn’t bear the thought of leaving. Nearing forty, they were among the youngest who remembered how the hanging tree got its name. Having grown up a distance out of town at the resort run by her parents, Aino had only heard about it, but Len knew firsthand. His father had been the last to hang from its branches.

A weaver, Aino liked the tight simplicity of Kalevala Bay. She thought of it like the rag rugs she made and sold at craft fair tables with the other women in the weaver’s guild: everybody had something to contribute, and when they all worked together it was beautiful, in its way. An outsider might look at that closed taconite plant, the exodus of youth, the abandoned Stone Building restoration project that had been intended to bring tourist shops to the lake front, and see a town in tatters. But Aino saw those pieces together, held strong.

Holding things together was something Aino prided herself on. Married at nineteen, she’d managed to keep her marriage from slipping into a pile of statistics, even after twenty
years. And although the weavers' guild was falling apart when she joined, it had grown in recent years, adding a word to its title every now and again for the sake of inclusion, expanding to become the North Lake County People's Weaving and Handicraft Guild. Years ago, it had been only the People's Weaving Guild, which Aino had thought inaccurate, since no men had ever asked to join. That name, like the hanging tree, reached back to the town's inception, when groups of immigrants who'd been on the wrong side of Finland's fight for independence -- the Red side -- moved en masse to create their own utopias on this side of the ocean. Aino's family had a history in that mostly abandoned politic. Her great-grandmother had been arrested for instigating some kind of trouble (the surviving details were sketchy), and her grandmother had, for a time, followed her cause to the Soviet Union, joining the Finnish communists in Viipuri. These were things that Aino had heard about growing up, but only in hushed tones. From her grandmother, Aino heard only regret for the risks she'd taken in her youth. This reformed and penitent woman wove flawlessly, leaving one purposeful defect to remind herself that only God is perfect.

Aino learned to weave from this grandmother. She also learned everything she needed to know to keep the guild's looms sturdy, their warp straight. The guild was one of the reasons Aino stayed in Kalevala Bay. When she was a young mother, losing her friends to college and jobs in other places, the guild was there for her. Joining was never something she would have thought to do on her own, although she'd seen flyers at People's Treadle Goods. The owner, Sylvie, always seemed to eye her with suspicion when she shopped there. Aino made a practice of holding her daughter Minna, then just a toddler, close to keep her from getting into trouble. On one visit, Sylvie finally said to her, "You're the Lahti girl." It wasn't a question.
“Saarinen, now,” Aino had replied. Sylvie responded with a pucker-mouthed *tsk* as she straightened a stack of quarter-sheet papers on the counter. “That was too bad about the father.” Few people mentioned his suicide—it was a private choice—so Aino wasn’t sure how to respond. Minna tugged at her pant leg and pointed to the cash register. Beside it sat a teddy bear with a handknit vest. Still unsure of Sylvie’s intent, Aino lifted her daughter up to her hip to whisper a reprimand for being so bold.

“Let her play with it,” Sylvie said, an order. Addressing Minna, she instructed her to hold the teddy bear but warned the girl that she’d need to give him back.

Minna refused the bear, burying her face in Aino’s shoulder when Sylvie held it out to her. Though she was small for her age, she was strong. Her little fingers dug into Aino’s neck.

“She’s shy,” Aino explained, embarrassed to realize what little contact her daughter had with strangers. Sylvie beamed a motherly grin and muttered Finnish words that went by too fast for Aino’s slow ear for the language. “Suomalainen” was all she heard: Finn. Sylvie’s smile was approving and warm.

“I knew your grandmother,” she said to Aino, who’d muttered a response, hoping to change the subject. As much as Aino loved her mummu, she knew the reputation she’d carried. That she left Kalevala Bay to live in Karelia was something Aino had only heard about with words of warning: *Don’t go chasing the unattainable*. After all, that was the moral of her grandmother’s story. She’d gone seeking a worker’s utopia, and for a while it had seemed that she found it. But when the tide turned on the wave of Finnish migration in the Soviet-occupied region, the young idealist’s husband had been taken away in the middle
of the night, and she was forced to sneak off to live with friends of friends in a remote cabin until she could make her way across the border.

“She was a good woman,” Sylvie had said, to Aino’s surprise. “She used to be a member of the guild.” The invitation to join was more of a command than an offering: “You’ll come to a meeting, then.” Sylvie spoke with the same brusque expectation that Aino’s grandmother did, her manner making it clear that there was no room to question her. Aino agreed without missing a beat.

Joining was one thing. Become a part of the group was another. The women were friendly enough, but like Aino herself they took their time accepting people they didn’t know. For almost two years, she was simply present, sitting in meetings or, on rare occasions, using a hand loom at the studio. Aside from Sylvie, who always went out of her way to make Aino feel welcome, the other members neither ignored nor especially acknowledged her. That distance hadn’t really changed, but at some point Aino felt her position change and grow, like rows of weft that become a pattern when you step back to see them together. The first sign was when, to her relief, she stopped having to introduce herself, a task that always required explanations to avoid the inevitable offense that followed when she answered “What’s your name?” with what sounded like I know.

In time, Aino was asked to set up the coffee, then to do chores from time to time. One day she sat down at a loom where she’d started a wool rug the day before and saw that someone else had added a foot to her pattern. She felt the web, slipping her fingers over its edge to feel the tension. There was more of the rug than what she’d made, and yet she couldn’t tell where she had left off and the other weaver began. After living all her life on the
edge of things – growing up at her parents’ resort, then moving to her husband’s hidden, wooded home – Aino felt drawn into the fold.

At home, though, she still kept her own loom, another inheritance from her once-Red grandmother. Homemade, it was a little rough in its construction but sturdy. Her loom stood low and wide, with a stance held strong to earth like the wide-legged women she came from. There were newer, lighter models now, but in all the years she’d been weaving, she never considered replacing it. In its hand-hewn parts, she felt a steady permanence, a weight, like there was a rightness to what she created there.

Aino’s weaving room was in the back corner of her house, a 1916 bungalow on the outskirts of town, built across the Tuonela from the hanging tree. Its two windows, one on each outer wall, once had a view of the old oak, but a ring of spruce planted twenty or so years earlier had grown up to block it. The furnishings were spare: only the loom, two folding tables, baskets of rags and yarn. Dust was inescapable in a room of yarn and thread. With every pick of weft, fibers brushed loose. The air was specked, the tables coated. But, other than dust, the room was meticulously bare. All of the weavings she made here hung hidden in the closet.

Sitting at the loom, Aino pushed a shuttle of thin wool yarn through an open shed of warp threads. She was weaving a tākānā, a reversible double-weave design that showed a pictorial design. On one side, the image would show light on dark; on the other, dark on light, like an exposed negative. The wall hanging was another of her salmon maidens, a series she’d begun years ago that showed the story of Aino, her namesake, the mythical girl in the Kalevala who’d drowned herself rather than marry. Aino hadn’t intended to make so many. Originally, she’d planned to make only one, the image of her namesake walking into
the waves to become the salmon maiden: a young woman caught in the moment just before her transformation. But weaving is not for those who want to sit down and start in the middle. The way she learned it, you must begin at the beginning and carry through till the end. There are no shortcuts. When Aino’s grandmother had instructed her on the loom, she said that time is the warp of life, and it must be woven well. To Aino, that meant keep busy, work hard, do the job right – beginning to end. So after she drew that first salmon maiden on graph paper, she set aside her draft and went back to sketch the whole story.

Each weaving showed a different scene. In the first, Aino’s brother stands sunken in a swamp, having been “sung” there by the old magician Vainamoinen, who bargained for a bride. One shows Aino being told of her fate. In another, the girl is weeping. The fourth illustrates her mother’s joy over finding such a powerful suitor. In still others, Aino opens her mother’s wedding chest and dresses in ceremonial clothes: six golden belts and seven blue skirts, woven by the daughter of the moon. After fifteen years of stolen time, she was finally nearing the end. The image on Aino’s loom was of a girl walking through a birch forest. Its top was a tangle of interlocked branches, slimming down in white trunks – dark blue, on the opposite side – to open out again as the ground, a swath of snow beneath the outline of Aino on her walk to the sea. With this one almost finished, only three remained.

“You’re in here again?” Len leaned in through the doorway. His thin hair stood on end, whorled in eight sweaty directions and lined from the hat he clasped in his hand. His face was ruddy from running.

Aino jerked, startled. “When did you get back?”

“I said I was home.” He lifted his shirt to wipe his brow, revealing a hint of loose skin slipping over the waistband of Lycra running pants.
“Any snow?”

“No.” Len’s lips puckered, disappointed. Aino twisted her body, leaning to block her husband’s view of what she was making. It was an unnecessary gesture. He didn’t pay much attention to her weaving, but she stretched an arm over the breast beam anyway. The less he knew, the better.

“I’m going to need to order more yarn,” she said as he turned from the doorway, trying to make it come out as if in passing. Between Len’s skiing, Aino’s weaving, and their contribution to their daughter’s college tuition, money was scarce.

“But I haven’t paid race fees yet.”

“You were supposed to do that in September.” Aino lifted one leg over the bench to straddle it, facing her husband. “Maybe that’s a sign that you’re not so eager anymore.”

Len’s jaw set. A muscle by his ear jumped.

“Are you done for the day?” she asked.

“Nope,” he said. “Just refilling my water bottle.” He turned to head back out to the trail.

For every woman, there is one thing she would like to change about her husband. For Aino, this was Len’s racing. That he had to compete was bad enough. What was worse, he had to win. And he did.

No competition was an unspoken tenet among the women of the guild. Everyone’s work was equal, and it was to stay that way. There was no need to outdo anyone, Aino told herself. Being equal keeps the peace. She set a pick of weft in place with three swift whacks of the loom’s beater. It makes things easier, selling only plain wool mats and rag rugs. Eila Paivatar was an exception, with her doilies, but she’d been around longer than anyone and no
one would accuse her of showing off. The weavings Aino made at home, though, were maybe too like the others’ work, maybe too different. As much as she loved to make them, she knew the other women wouldn’t approve.

After beating the last row of the tākānā into place, Aino released the warp-beam brake and began the work of finishing the web. If she was close to the end, she never left her work undone, a habit bred only partly from the joy she took in completion. An unfinished weaving on her loom meant living with the nagging worry that someone might see it. Only rarely did anyone stop by. The house was too out of the way for that. But the chance was enough to raise concern. Other guilds weren’t like hers, Aino knew. She’d been to enough yarn conventions and weavers’ shows to see that their way was their own. In Aino’s guild, there was a tacit understanding: no divas allowed.

Looking back, Aino couldn’t remember anyone telling her what was and wasn’t allowed among the members of the guild. The expectation was simply there, running in undercurrents that pulled the legs out of anyone who tried to stand out. Aino’s earlier weavings, made before she joined the guild, decorated the walls and floors of her home. If anyone asked, though, she always said they were gifts or vague purchases.

Aino untied the warp from its rod, pulled the remaining threads free, and carried her work from the loom to a nearby table for hemstitching. When she was finished, she stood back, arms akimbo, feet planted in the sturdy stance of her mother. “It’s okay,” she decided, paying herself the highest complement she dared. Aino plucked the wall-hanging from the table, slipped a dowel through its turned-down edge, and strung it for hanging. Then she opened the closet door. With a quick shove, she pushed aside the rest of her woven story. Then she wrapped the string around a hanger, and hid it inside.
Two

Len’s lungs ached as he strained to push himself to run another hundred yards uphill. He was nearing the top of the course, where the trail climbed a steep embankment to a bald rise where he would give himself permission to rest. This was the course Len measured himself by. Whatever the conditions, he knew what his time count meant – whether he was faster or slower than he’d been the time before. The Fischer Park trails followed either side of the river, up an easy slope from Lake Superior to the Falls. Then a round-about carve through Norway Pines took the path around the side of a sheer cliff before opening out to a clearing where a single oak grew. Len kept his eyes on that tree as he ran toward it. Even though his lungs seared with the effort of keeping his body in motion, that tree pulled him forward. With its branches in his line of sight, there would be no quitting.

When the ground leveled off into tall grass and then bare rock, Len slowed to a walk. He puffed long, breathy O’s and E’s, stretching an arm high to release a cramp from his side. This was his fourth run at the hill. His last for the day. Len’s quads burned, a good feeling. Burn was what he was out here for. He needed it to build up his legs for skiing.

The sky was overcast, purple to the west. Snow was predicted overnight. Let it be a blizzard, he thought. With his running times seeming slower this year, he needed a base. Not even a good base, just enough coverage so that he could get out on the trail – he could make do with a few inches even, with his rock skis, a scratched-up pair from two seasons ago. But he needed to get a gauge on his time before he would send in his race applications. Just
enough snow for one time around, he thought. With that, he’d know if he really was slowing down.

Len had turned forty over the summer, which wouldn’t bother him, except that it would affect his racing. Aric, his boss at the ski shop, had pointed out that he’d be in a new age division, and he had a good chance of winning in his category regardless of how the younger racers did. But he didn’t want qualified wins. He wanted wins. Thirty, thirty-two, even thirty-five wasn’t an unusual age for an elite racer. Len had taken home trophies from good-sized races even after he topped out of the thirty-to-thirty-four category. The races he won last year were smaller, but they were still wins. Unqualified wins. The season had ended on a bad note, though. He blamed it on a slushy course, but that loss had stuck with him over the summer, pushing him to run longer, lift more weights, crunch his abs until they ached. Here it was November, with dark clouds moving in loaded with snow, and after four brutal shots at the hill, he felt beat. He didn’t lack agility or strategy. But more than ever before, Len felt tired.

Len couldn’t think of anything he hated more than climbing hills. He did it because he had to – there was nothing more efficient for building up quads, endurance and aerobic capacity all at once – but every climb was a struggle. When he was on the high school ski team, his coach initiated him to the pain of running ascents. The coach was a born-again Christian who made each workout into a battleground between righteousness and the lurking dangers of lethargy. “Run, boys!” he’d shout after them from the bicycle he rode to bring up the rear. “Don’t stop! The devil is right behind you!” His words nipped Len’s heels, inducing genuine fear. As a boy, he felt cursed to live where he did, by a mile the closest house to the hanging tree, sitting on top of the hill that local legend named kipumaki, the hill of pain on
the other side of the Tuonela River, guarded by the stunted daughter of death. She was the star of every boy’s ghost stories, and she lived within reach of his home. The campfire stories, Len outgrew. But his distaste for hills was only compounded when he was the one who spotted his father’s swinging body. He was eighteen then, and in that instant, he had found himself utterly alone.

Len’s dad had been forty when he died. His mother had passed away six years earlier from a congenital heart defect that no one knew about until it was too late. Her death might have been what set his dad’s suicide in motion, but Len never knew. Without his mother there as the go-between, he might as well have lived on another planet from his dad. His brother was out of the house by then, gone off out west and hard to keep track of. The two boys looked exactly like their parents: his older brother was the living image of his mother, with a prominent chin that lent a belligerent playfulness to his face. Len was built like his father. Big, with broad cheeks and small eyes. Until he learned otherwise, he’d always thought the man was indestructible.

Len remembered when his father took him out for his first skiing lesson. He was six, and big enough for a pair of wooden skis that his parents dragged out from who knows where. Len wore regular snow boots that strapped to the skis with a springlike contraption that kept slipping off the backs of his ankles until his dad pulled them so tight that his knees bowed forward. His father carried him out to the trailhead — the same path that Len still maintained behind his house — and set him on his feet in the tracks. Then he pushed Len over with a shove to his shoulder. As the boy struggled to right himself, his arms only sank, pushing up the wrists of the hand-me-down snowsuit he wore that was two sizes too large. The snow hurt against his bare skin, but he couldn’t work his way free of it, until he realized...
that he'd been holding himself down, his own hand pressing on the end of the knit scarf his mother had tied around his neck. When he righted himself, his father lifted him with one arm out of the snow and held him close. His neck was muscled and thick, and to Len it was frightening, like the python in the family's encyclopedia set. His breath smelled like Folger's and sausage. "Now you know how to fall," his father said. "Never do it again."

To the south, Len could see the spruce trees that circled his yard, and between them, the roof's slope and a brief catch of the sun's reflection on the house where he still lived. He'd planted the trees after his father's death, to block the view. When he found himself alone in the house at eighteen, he'd moved his things downstairs to the bedroom he now shared with his wife. Sleeping in the same space where his parents once had slept was less terrible than the view of the hanging tree outside his childhood window. It wasn't long, though, before he was on the trails again. He felt drawn to that hilltop. As much as he hated it, he needed to go there, to prove again and again that he could climb that hill and face it down. Years later, that room, still with a line of sight to the hanging tree, would belong to his daughter. The view had never bothered her. Even young, she'd thought the tree magical for not needing any soil for its roots.

Minna, the first of his family to go beyond high school, had moved to the Twin Cities in September. She was a quiet girl, still kid-skinny at eighteen, susceptible to the slightest breezes and constantly cold. Her quietness was different from her mother's, at least to people who, like Len, understood the characters of silent people. Aino's silence was focused and preoccupied, secretive. She was a woman enveloped by her own world. Minna's was the quiet of an observer, steeped in the world outside herself and yet distanced from it.
Len's arms itched under layers of polypropylene and fleece. The skin was etched with tiny triangular cuts, a rash from rolling in frost-crusted grass after last night's sauna. Although he'd once wished his daughter had been born with his immunity to temperature, he knew she didn't belong in the bitter north. This wish, he knew, was less for her than for himself. When he'd lost his mother, and then his father, the gravitational center of his family was gone. Once, he'd wanted to be that grounding force that held her here. But when she left, head high and brimming with a confidence that mystified him, he envied her the freedom of living without the pull of a place.

Len's wish for snow — and a chance to test his time — came true when eight inches fell overnight with a November gale storm that closed schools and roads. He was outside at dawn, strapping on an old, broad pair of wood skis handed down to him from his dad. With this many inches in one dumping, he needed something sturdy enough to break trail. The skis were clunky, with three-pin bindings that squeaked no matter how much WD-40 he sprayed into the metal clasps, but they were heavy, straight and wide, and they served this purpose well.

Breaking trail seemed a waste of energy, but the mechanized groomers wouldn't be through for days. In November, there was no guarantee the snow would still be there by the time they passed. Len had spoken up about it once, at a council meeting, where he complained that it sometimes took a whole day after a snowfall for the ski trails to be groomed, but his statement was only noted. Wayne Paulet, who was on the council, had pulled Len aside after the meeting to explain that the same crew that cleared the roads was also in charge of the trails. "You wouldn't want to make people wait to get out and about just so you can go skiing, would you?" His tone had been mild and joking, until Len responded
that he didn’t give a rat’s ass about the roads, arguing that most people had four-wheel-drive if they had any sense, anyway. Wayne had looked at him, mouth agape. When Len offered to drive the tractor himself, Wayne replied that grooming the trails was a city job. Union. That was all he had to say to make his point clear: impossible. So Len cut the track himself, and burned with the thought that once he switched to his other skis, he would be starting at a deficit. The resulting fatigue would affect his time.

Len started a trail around the back of the house, then through an opening between two spruce and over a mound of dirt where Fischer Road dead-ended with a hooked turn into his yard. From there he followed a path that, twice a year, he cleared of brush that threatened to overgrow the trail. Mid-summer and fall, he swept through bitter-smelling stalks of tansy weeds with a scythe. When he was young, he and his brother used to follow their father’s trail-clearing, making swords from the dried stalks. Now, when he sank too deep in the snow, he could feel the stubble of shorn canes. He lightened his pace, hopping with rabbit-quick lifts, well-practiced explosions from hours of Spenst training.

The morning sun stretched long shadows through poplars and spruce. This side of the river was once logged bare and had the scraggly look of a recovering forest. Seventy or eighty years couldn’t raise the kind of burly giants that grew on the opposite bank, where towering White and Norway pines blocked the sun and much of the new snow. Breaking trail was easier, once he crossed to the other side, but even hours after the storm ended, the groundcover seemed thinner here, pocked and lined with fallen needles. The air was still. Quiet. The only sound, soft plops from snow-laden branches springing up after each dropped burden, slapping up to cast a chain reaction up the tree. One of these small avalanches landed on the back of Len’s head and then slipped down to catch in the open neck of his fleece
jacket just as he began to skew out his ski tips in a herringbone climb. He left it there, melting rivulets down his spine. With the top of the hill in his sights and the draw of that weathered oak, Len felt pulled backward by his own weight; he couldn’t stop for fear of giving in to gravity.

Even on his second lap, with the heavy board skis traded out for fiberglass, climbing just seemed to be getting harder to do. At the top of the hill, when Len stopped to check his time, he swore. It wasn’t even close to what he’d need for the Swenson Classic. For that, he needed to be ready to make it up and down twenty kilometers and still maintain a position to pull ahead on the twisting descent to the finish line in Tannin Falls City Park. Len factored in the extra effort of breaking trail, and scraped a minute from his time. He could still win. With that, he decided to mail in his entry.

Minna had been home on winter break for two days, spending much of her time on the couch watching videos, when she came down to the basement while Len was lifting weights. He liked having her home, and having her there while he worked out. She kept his mind from spiraling back over the laps of the previous year’s President’s Day race. But what he didn’t like was that she had to talk. Or that she seemed to be confiding in him again, unloading the things she said she couldn’t tell Aino. He was uncomfortable, being in the middle of things. When she told him about her plans, his first question was, “What did your mother say?” He slowly lowered a barbell to his chest as he said this, then raised it with a measured count.

“I didn’t tell her,” Minna said. She sat tailor-style on the dryer with her elbows propped on her knees. The lid on the washing machine was open, a reminder to Len to clean
out the ski wax coating its sides after he left it in the pocket of a windbreaker. “You know how she is,” she continued. “Like, just because she’s afraid to do anything new, everything I want to do is just some stupid phase.”

Len finished one last rep before carefully easing the barbell back onto its stand. He let go in stages, making sure the metal bars held before he allowed its full weight to settle. “You need to tell her,” he said. “She ought to know before you send the application.”

Minna’s head rested on her hands. Keeping her arms still, she ran her fingers through her hair by pushing her head down. She’d always done things a little backward like that, with inefficient motion. Like this plan to transfer colleges when she’d just started at the U, or like coming to Len with what she wanted her mother to know.

Len sat up. “So what’s the problem? You told me. Tell her.”

“I’ve tried,” Minna said. “She doesn’t listen.”

Len picked up a twenty-pound dumbbell and started counting a set of bicep curls.

“See, you can lift weights and carry on a conversation. But Mom just drifts away into her own little world. It drives me nuts.”

“I don’t have to think much, doing this,” he said. What she said was true, though, about Aino. He used to worry about how well she was taking care of Minna, when he’d come home to find his daughter plunked in front of the television and Aino at the loom. Once, when Minna was four, he’d come home to find his wife frantically searching for her. “We were playing hide and seek,” Aino told him, her voice hoarse and urgent. “She’s not anywhere.” Len found Minna within a few minutes of looking. When he went outside, he saw the curtain flutter in the sauna window that faced the house. She was sitting in the dressing room with her legs crossed exactly as she sat on the dryer. When he asked her why
she hadn’t come out when she was called, Minna said, “She wasn’t looking. I caught her not looking!” Her lips were pulled tight in a small, bruised heart.

“You’re really sure this is what you want to do?” Len said as he turned over to lie on his back to work his chest. He spread his arms wide, lifting two dumbbells up and in over his chest with his elbows crooked.

“If you want to study marine biology, you pretty much have to live by an ocean.”

Len looked at his daughter without turning his head. He was glad to have her there to look at. The barbell hanging over his head when he lay on the bench unsettled him. He didn’t trust the rack to hold up. At any moment it could come crashing down. His own arms, though, he never questioned. Minna must have seen his distrust of gravity in the way he looked at her, and took it personally.

“Florida has a good program,” she insisted. “The U is fine, but I don’t want to end up in some boring old lab testing corn. I don’t want to end up like her.”

Minna was the one who showed him the weavings that Aino kept hidden away. “Why doesn’t she do anything with these?” she’d asked him. She was twelve then, and already four wall hangings had been pushed off to one side in the closet. He’d stopped counting at ten. Len caught himself looking at the barbell.

“I think she’s just chickenshit,” Minna said. “At least you go out there and really try.”

Len’s chest was exposed in the spread of his weighted arms as he kept his eye trained on the bar hanging over him, forcing himself to believe that it would hold. He couldn’t tell her — and hadn’t told anyone — that he only entered races he thought he could win.
Swenson wasn’t an important race. It was the kind Len used to put on his schedule as a warm-up for the bigger ones that drew elite skiers. The Swenson Classic was always iffy. Scheduled in December, when snow cover was a probability but never a guarantee, it had been called off some years and cancelled with no refund. Len took a chance on it, though. He needed to boost his confidence, after that slushy race last President’s Day.

When Len walked out to his truck at four-thirty that December morning, the sky was white with the band of the Milky Way spreading like a line of thick smoke. The air was so cold that when Len looked up he felt a part of the sky, as though earth’s atmosphere had drifted off into night, leaving no boundary between snow drifts and space. And still, something held him here.

“Minna said she wants to sleep,” Aino said when she came out of the house. Her breath rose and dissipated into the dark.

Dawn was just beginning to spread pale into the jagged, tree-lined edge of a pond when Len and Aino arrived at the course in Tannin Falls. Aino marched off to stand in line for Len’s race packet while he stretched and warmed up. His focus turned inward. He felt his muscles and breath. He visualized his last race. There would be no mistakes this time. His wax was perfect. He drank plenty of fluids along the drive, ate carbs last night and a protein bar this morning. Scanning the terrain, he planted the hanging tree at the top of each hill.

“Looks like some new faces,” Aino said. Len propped a hand on her shoulder to steady himself as he stretched. She pinned a number to his bodysuit.

Len didn’t notice the other skiers the way Aino did. When he went to the chute, they were only there in his periphery. He knew the colors of their clothes. He knew if they were skiing on Peltonens or Rossignols, but on the course, he didn’t care who they were. He only
thought about where they were, and where he was in relation to them: pacing, watching, holding back, judging when to push himself into that finish-line kick. That kick was how he won races. The depth of his reserve was unmatched; even when his muscles drained in anaerobic deprivation, he could find a place inside himself that always pushed him forward. A voice that told him what it meant to fall, and how to keep going. That voice was joined now, in chorus with Minna’s.

He held his ground through three laps. On the fourth, as he pushed himself to stay with the pack on the last climb, his legs began to turn rubbery. His focus was acute: he imagined a gnarled, sprawling oak at the top and drove himself forward with the need to win coursing through oxygen-deprived muscles, filling his lungs, creating the force that lifted each herringbone step of his skis as he climbed. He gained on the lead skier at the hill’s crest, and pulled ahead as the two of them jockeyed for position on the last sloping descent. Then, as the ground leveled out, some slit of a kid in neon orange flew past, his skis barely touching the trail.

* * *

As the skiers took off in bobbing waves, Aino watched from the back of a small crowd at the gate. Only family would make it to an event like this, she thought. You really have to love someone to endure the frigid wait to cheer them on. She liked these mornings, though, painful cold as they were. Especially at small races, like this, where the competition wasn’t so fierce. She shared good-humored smiles with the other spectators, recognizing in one another the ridiculousness of this quiet, stomping tribe of winter people. The morning
light was beautiful, too, spilling through birches and over a ridge to cast a receding shadow on a frozen pond. On a morning like this, Aino squinted into a world so bright it hurt. She saw in lines of light and dark like a tākānā, a world that felt simple, cold-stripped to snow and shadow.

Across the lake, one skier appeared, then a small pack, gliding through a break in a stand of pines. She couldn’t tell which of the pulsing, pumping bodies was Len. Aino found the powerful elegance of the skiers beautiful from a distance, where all she could see was motion set in line and color. Like most things, she preferred not to see the sport with the scrutiny of close viewing. Up close, it was all grimace and snot. So she stood back on the sidelines and waited for Len, looking forward to breakfast in a warm restaurant smelling hash browns and grease, when she would feel the satisfying itch of cold seeping from her legs.

When the first wave passed the starting line to begin the second lap, Len was in the middle of the pack. In the end, she knew he’d make his break for the finish line. His singular desire to win was what separated them most, so much so that Aino had come close to leaving him once. She’d had a miscarriage while he was at work. It happened so early that she would have thought it was just a late period, if she hadn’t known otherwise. She wasn’t hurt, she decided, not enough to make the half-hour drive to the hospital, but she was disappointed, and hoped to at least share that with her husband. When she told Len about it that evening, his response was “oh.” Within minutes, he was wearing his ski clothes and heading out the door. He wouldn’t look at her, even when she stopped him. “I need to train,” was all he’d said, pulling free of her grasp. He was gone for four hours. Later that night, she sat and watched her daughter sleep. She looked out the window at the ring of trees that sheltered her
home from the wind, and beyond it to the moonlit line of the lake’s horizon, and knew that
even if she could leave him, she could never leave this place.

The skiers passed again, beginning their fourth and final lap. Len lagged at the back
of the lead pack, struggling. Aino shouted encouragement as he skied by. As usual, though,
he kept his eyes on the course and continued on, downing a paper cup of water in one
draught as he went through the chute. The small crowd milled in anticipation of the race’s
end. Aino raised her face to the sun to feel its weak heat loosen the cold from her skin.

“What number are you rooting for?” asked a woman beside her. “I’ll help you cheer.”

“Sixty-eight,” Aino said. “You?”

“Forty-four. My son.” The hair sticking out the bottom of her crocheted hat was gray,
but her face looked young, unwrinkled aside from the laugh lines at the corners of her eyes.

“You did a beautiful job on this hat,” Aino said, pulling off her mitten. “May I?” she
reached to feel its texture between her thumb and forefinger.

“Oh, heavens,” the woman said. “I bought this at Herberger’s.” She took it off to give
Aino a closer look. “Anyway, who has time for that kind of thing anymore?”

Aino ran her fingers over the hat’s seams before handing it back. “Is your son the
only racer in the family?”

The woman said that he was. “This is his first real race. Adult race,” she explained,
adding that he was only in high school. “He’ll do fine, I suppose. It’s just a little nerve-
wracking to watch him out there.”

“It is hard, isn’t it, to see your little fish swimming in a big pond.” With
disappointment, she thought of Minna, probably still asleep. Aino had wanted her to be here
for this.
“Look at that!” the woman said, holding a hand over her eyes to squint toward the break in the trees. “That’s him! He’s right up at the front of the pack. The one in orange.” The corners of her mouth turned in an impressed frown. “Not too shabby, for a skinny little guy. They sure do surprise you, don’t they?”

“That’s for sure,” Aino said. Everything Minna did seemed to come as a surprise. One day she wanted to be a nurse, the next a firefighter in Colorado. Her first dream was to be a weaver like Aino. Now she wouldn’t touch yarn unless it were knitted into a sweater and purchased at a mall.

The woman asked about Aino’s children. “I just have the one,” she said. “She’s at home. Couldn’t take the four-thirty wake up call.”

“I have four,” the woman said. “Dusty’s the youngest, and they’re as different as they come. The oldest one was so easy. She knew what she wanted and she did it.” The woman pursed her lips. “I think it’s harder for the younger ones to find their place. Dusty tried so hard to be his own little boy, keeping out of the older ones’ shadows. Looks like this might be his place to shine.”

Aino hugged her arms to her sides and wondered what Minna would have been like if she’d had a brother or sister. Maybe she was so all-over-the-map because she didn’t have that other person to rub up against.

“Kids can be so competitive,” the woman said. Her eyes were trained on the edge of the woods where the trail opened out into the field. “It’s easier when they have their own things to be good at. They don’t butt heads so much.”

A man whooped from the edge of the woods, standing along the side of the trail. Soon a skier appeared, arms pumping in hard rhythm with his stride. Aino recognized him from
other races. Ole, or Pete, or something like that. Len was right behind him. Then, as another skier pulled around the corner and sped past the two leaders, the woman in the crocheted hat bounced on the balls of her feet and hollered. Aino clapped with her, cheering on this shadowed son who had finally found his place to shine. The woman clasped Aino’s arm with one hand and held the other to her mouth as her son crossed the finish line in first place.

Aino congratulated the proud mother, who disappeared into a crowd that felt larger now than it had before. More people always showed up for the ending than for the beginning. The end was all anyone cared about. Len crossed the finish in a jostling pack, barely scraping a second place finish. Aino watched him through the crowd and waited for him to come out to the far end of the chute before making her way around to where he stood on his skis with a new tee-shirt slung limp over his shoulder. He jabbed the tips of his poles into his quick-release bindings, then stepped off his skis. His fingers were bunched together in new, three-fingered gloves – lobster mitts, he’d called them when he’d first showed them to her, demonstrating how his hand fit inside by holding his fingers like Mr. Spock from Star Trek. “It’s like a ‘V’ for victory,” he’d said.

“That’s not what Spock says,” Aino had told him, although at the time she couldn’t remember what it was that he did say.

As Len picked up his skis, Aino remembered. “Live long and prosper,” she said, holding her hand in a “V,” an attempt to tease his mind off the finish. His jaw remained clenched shut. Silent, she walked beside him to the truck. As they drove out of town, Len passed the Pancake Haus without turning. Aino’s stomach growled the whole ride home.
Three

When Aino drove into town for the guild meeting, she brought Minna with her. She couldn't stand the thought of her daughter spending another day on the couch. "Time is the warp of life," she found herself saying as she urged her daughter to turn off the television. Len was working on Minna's car, a ten-year-old Honda that he kept running with regular tune-ups whenever she came home. Aino had hoped to be able to spend some time with her daughter after the meeting. What she'd been looking forward to for weeks was just a walk along the shoreline with Minna. She imagined the whole scene. The day would be cold but bright, and as they strolled along Water Street, Minna would look out over the water and see what Aino saw there: a horizon line that held a person in place, the view from a home she would promise to come back to. But once they were in town, her daughter said she wanted to take the car to Grand Marais for a movie. After a long argument, in which Minna wheedled the car away, Aino walked into the meeting late.

She missed the speaker from a yarn shop in Grand Rapids, who came with a presentation on adding texture with new materials. Aino sat down just as the woman was finishing up. She left a catalogue with each of the twelve people in attendance, and stacked a few extras on a table by the door on the way out. Sylvie let the catalogue hang from her fingers, holding it out from her body with a disgusted look until the woman was gone, then she tossed it in the trash as she walked up to the front of the room to begin the meeting.
She said, “Did we just pay for someone to show us a catalogue? The nerve of that woman.” Aino didn’t see whether there was anything more to the presentation than flipping through glossy pages, but if that was all the woman had demonstrated, then certainly it did seem like taking advantage.

Aino was sitting beside Eila Paivatar. She liked watching the older woman crochet. The way her hands moved was steady and peaceful. Her pace was that of constant usefulness, never in a hurry. It called to mind a word her grandmother hadn’t been able to translate for her. The best she could do was Swedish, konsthantverk. To Aino, this word she’d learned to describe weaving sounded like constant work. Whenever she saw Eila crocheting, she thought of that word. When Aino was younger and hadn’t seen enough of Mrs. Paivatar to know her, she’d thought – with kind condescension – that the woman was slow because her attention seemed to be caught in the loops and knots in her careful fingers. But when Sylvie said The nerve of that woman! Eila echoed her sentiments (or, that’s what Aino thought she intended to do) with a hearty snuff through her nose. Over the years, Aino had grown to admire Eila’s fortitude. Even when Sylvie blustered about whatever was bothering her – she spoke with passion, railing over the smallest injustices – Eila was never intimidated by Sylvie’s fervor. Aino often chose a seat beside Mrs. Paivatar in meetings, sticking near her as though following the eye of the storm.

Sylvie called for the reading of the previous month’s minutes and then for old business. When she asked for new business, Eila’s daughter Karen brought up a lead for another speaker. Karen was a tall woman who looked like she’d never grown comfortable with her height. Even sitting, she slouched forward, neck stretched out instead of up. Her posture made her look as though she were subordinating herself, but there was authority in
her voice when she said the speaker she was recommending would be worth the higher price she was asking. Aino admired Karen, in spite of her slouching, or maybe because of it: her posture made Aino feel that Karen saw no need to lord herself over everyone.

Sylvie led a vote – the speaker would be invited – then opened the floor for more new business. After the meeting, as everyone milled around admiring each other’s newest rugs (though mostly they looked no different from any of the ones they’d made before), Aino heard Sylvie compliment Karen on a striped rug she’d made. The way she paid a compliment was loaded: it always carried criticism, or instructions and a warning. “This one is nice,” she said, running her blunt fingernails through its fringe. “It’s so much simpler than some of the ones in that last batch you brought in.” Aino saw Karen’s shoulders hunch a little lower, holding herself at the older woman’s level as Sylvie came around to stand beside her. “What ever happened to that sister-in-law you brought around?” she asked Karen, who replied with a polite excuse, something about how busy her one-time visitor was these days. Aino had been there, though, when Karen’s sister-in-law showed Sylvie some of her work. “We sell useful things,” she remembered hearing the old matron say, her voice flat and loud. In her next breath Sylvie drew attention to a denim rag rug Aino had made, making a point to say how nice and thick it was, how it would feel good to stand on while she washed dishes.

After everyone left, Aino stayed around to warp one of the floor looms. Minna came in when she was just getting started and asked if she was ready to go. With a chain of warp slung around her neck, Aino said, “Does it look like I’m ready?”

Minna fiddled with a table loom, cranking its lever up and down, opening and closing the shed.
“Too bad there aren’t any skeins of yarn that need measuring,” Aino said, feeling sorry for snapping at her daughter. “You used to love playing with the warping wheel. Do you remember that?”

“Not really.”

Aino heard a thunk from the table loom. When she turned, Minna’s hands were in her pockets and she was ambling over to the window. “I do remember that beanbag chair you used to have in your weaving room. I thought it would look good in my dorm.”

“That? I’m sure we threw that out a long time ago. Duct tape only goes so far.” After thinking a minute, Aino said, “I remember doing it. There was a hole in the side and it left a trail of little white nuggets like Hansel and Gretel.”

“Like what?”

“Never mind,” Aino said. She forgot. When Minna was young, she’d made a point not to tell her fairy tales. They sent the wrong messages, mostly telling girls to wait for Prince Charming and other such nonsense. In the story of Aino, the mother laments in the end, warning against lulling daughters with fairy tales of marriage. That was how she remembered hearing it from her grandmother, who’d committed to memory several runos she learned while staying with a family before her escape from Karelia. One of the old men in the family, a great uncle, maybe, knew songs that were never recorded when Elias Lonrott collected the Kalevala stories. It was from this man that Aino’s grandmother learned that it’s better to keep your talents hidden. Still, Aino was a little sad now to see that her daughter didn’t even recognize Hansel and Gretel. Maybe if she did, Aino thought, she might know how to find her way home.
Minna leaned against the exposed brick wall looking out a window taller than she was. “What are you making?” she said, turning toward Aino. With the light behind her hair, its color was almost red. Her face was shadowed.

“Guess,” Aino said, a little surprised at the bitterness in her own voice.

“Rag rugs.” Minna’s voice was sing-song and blasé. “Don’t you get bored?”

“Oh, no,” Aino replied, too fast, making up for her tone. “Come over here and help me,” she said. Her daughter complied, but not without saying, “You might as well work in a factory, turning screws.”

Aino directed her daughter to a spot at the rear of one of the old floor looms. The loom was heavy and broad, its wood shiny with a dark red enamel paint that was worn where pieces rubbed against each other. The rocking beater hung from round-cut log that was worn to bare wood where it cradled into the loom’s frame.

“Hold this,” Aino said, handing Minna a loose chain of cotton warp. “Not too tight. Keep it taut, but let me pull it.” Aino began to wind the warp beam. “A little more give,” she said with a light tug. “That’s it. Like the reins of a horse.”

Aino slowed her winding, as she did with each turn, to insert a piece of stiff paper in the roll of warp. “Let up a little,” she said, tugging the line.

“You’re the one pulling it too tight. I’m holding it just like you told me to.”

Minna dropped the warp chain and scooted over to the wall, where she leaned back and stretched her legs straight, crossing them at the ankle. Aino finished her work in silence. After a while, she moved around to the front of the loom, sat on its bench, and began counting the heddles she’d use for the rug, starting from the center and working her way out. Minna said something, but Aino’s attention was focused on the loom.
“Fourteen,” she said aloud, holding the bar where she left off. “Minna, I need to think.”

“There you go again.” Minna said.

Aino continued her count, stopping to mark the twenty-sixth heddle before going back to the middle to start in the other direction. “Did you say something?”

“No.” Minna scoffed and turned back toward the window.

“That’s all right. Talking isn’t for everyone,” Aino said. She thought of Len leaving that night, years ago, his terse *I have to train*. Neither of them ever mentioned the miscarriage again. She’d seen enough of his character over the years to accept that he just didn’t absorb things the way she did. He had his limitations, like anyone else. “There’s a lot to be said for keeping your mouth shut. You keep the peace better that way.”

Aino stopped. “You’ve been down in the mouth since you got here. Is something wrong at school?” Minna didn’t turn around.

“You can tell us,” Aino assured her. “You know, it’s okay if you ever have to move back home.”

“I’m going out for a walk.” Minna’s tone was abrupt.

Aino straightened her back, holding tight to a heddle with one hand and resting the other on her knee as she watched her daughter wrap a scarf around her neck. Minna was looking out the window at the lake, just as Aino had hoped, but it was clear from the jerking yanks on her scarf that she didn’t find the same comfort in the steady blue of the horizon that Aino did. She let go of the heddle. “I’ll come with you.”

Minna raised her eyebrows, an expression that lay somewhere between approval and resignation, with something harder underneath.
Outside, the still air kept the full force of ten degrees below zero in a holding pattern around Aino’s body: aching cold against exposed skin, but bearable. If there were a wind, it would have been enough to make pores hurt. Aino zipped her coat and felt her own heat spread into the jacket’s down. Beside her, Minna cursed. Always a mother, Aino wanted to tell her daughter she should have a hat on, but she didn’t. If she wanted to hold onto this child who was slipping away, she couldn’t push too hard.

It was sunny and silent with the kind of quiet that needs to be broken in order to be heard. Only when broad sheets of ice shifted, groaning, did it become clear that what was missing as they walked along the lakeshore was the hush and sigh of pebbles rolling in waves. Aino listened to the crunch of her daughter’s footsteps in rhythm with her own, and felt satisfied. The sound was drowned out as a diesel engine thundered on the highway.

Minna’s shoulders hunched to her ears. She kept her eyes on the ground directly in front of her feet. Aino looked over the lake to the slate blue line beyond the frozen field of white. As they neared Corlynn’s Cupboard, she suggested they step inside. Minna cut across the street in a shuffling run to the door of the coffee shop. Cardamom and rich, dark roast beans saturated the air in the four-table shop. Corlynn hollered from the back. An oven door squeaked and slammed before she appeared behind the counter, red-faced from the heat.

“Minna!” she exclaimed. “How’s school?”

“Good.” Tiny cracks of dimples flashed in her cheeks and disappeared. Aino smiled at her daughter’s shyness and wondered that she could get along, so far away from people who saw introversion as something other than a character flaw.

“Grades?”

“Good.”
“Love life?”

“Mrs. Heikilla…” Minna blushed. Aino stood by, the proud mother. She added nothing to Minna’s terse answers; that is, what little more she could add. With Corlynn, it was better not to tell all that you knew.

“Coffee and pulla,” Aino said, with a glance toward Minna for her approval before finishing off her order with a smart nod to Corlynn.

They drank in silence, sitting at a table next to a plate glass window fogged from the oven’s heat. Minna’s brow pursed into a line at the bridge of her nose as Loretta Du Bois parked in front of the window.

“Oh well,” Aino said, gesturing her coffee cup toward the clouded pane. “You can’t see very well anyway, what with all that haze.”

“What are you talking about?” Minna said.

“She blocked your view and you made a face. I figured you were bugged.”

“You always think you know everything that’s going on with a person.”

Aino straightened her neck and took a sip of coffee, trying not to respond to Minna’s sharp tone. If there was something the girl wanted to bring up, it would be better to do it in private, without the eyes and ears and mouth of Kalevala Bay standing at the counter to eavesdrop. She watched Loretta step down from her SUV. The woman always wore such impractical shoes.

Loretta Du Bois owned Lake Spirit Gallery, next door to Corlynn’s. Aino had gone in only once, out of curiosity. The art was beautiful – mostly paintings and sculptures done by local artists who, Aino discovered as she read their prominently displayed biographies, were almost all Native American. Loretta had moved to town with the idea that she would discover
or create a kind of northern Santa Fe. When Aino stepped into the shop, Loretta had ignored her, too busy following a pair of well-dressed tourists as they browsed the walls of the narrow store. Aino listened to her tell them how exciting the art was up here. Undiscovered, she called it, standing next to a print of a George Morrison painting. How undiscovered can it be, Aino wondered, when Morrison’s work was displayed in the White House.

When the couple left without buying anything, Loretta had tossed a smirk in Aino’s direction. “The horizon line motif is very common in his work,” the gallery owner informed her, with a nod in the direction of the print.

“I know,” Aino said. “I saw an exhibit a few years ago.” She remembered reading that he painted horizons to represent the borderland he inhabited, living between Indian and white worlds. It wasn’t something Aino would have thought, that the horizon could mean being caught between two living peoples. Until she’d read that, the paintings had called to mind the täränaarelat, the horizon dwellers, inhabiting the space between life and death. When she looked out over the lake, they were what she saw. To her, it was a peaceful stasis, not a place of conflict.

Loretta had perked up when Aino mentioned the exhibit. “Oh, you’re an aficionado?” Aino muttered noncommittally, unwilling to broadcast her interest.

“Are you an artist?” Loretta probed. Aino had considered telling her about the täränäs. She’d always thought that one day she might want to show them, maybe even sell them, but that wasn’t possible. Not if she wanted to keep the peace. When she told Loretta about making rag rugs for the guild, the gallery owner’s interest waned.

Watching Loretta struggle over an ice patch in slick-soled boots, Aino sipped her coffee and secretly rooted for the ice.
“Are you even paying attention?” Minna said. She started wrapping her scarf around her neck just as Loretta walked into the coffee shop. Aino peered into her almost-empty cup. She didn’t reach for her coat.

“Paying attention to what?”

“I said, are you ready?”

Aino stalled. “In a minute.” She turned her face toward the window, feeling strangely embarrassed by the prospect of walking by Loretta to the door. They’d met only once, but Aino worried about being recognized, as though this slick-booted woman might stop and point her out, saying, “I remember you. The rag rug woman.” There was something in the way Loretta had said “rag rugs” that had left Aino feeling like the awkward, gangly teenager she’d once been.

Loretta turned from the register, change in hand, and walked out with the small steps her chunky heeled boots afforded. She sounded like Len in ski boots, with a little less click in the step. Aino watched out the corner of her eye as Loretta’s gaze passed over her. She was greeted with a hair-flinging, “Db, hello.”

After Loretta left, Corlynn said, “Doesn’t she just think she’s something else?”

Minna shrugged, uninterested.

“Must think she’s a movie star.” Corlynn wiped a patch of flour from the arm of her tee shirt. “Although, you’ve really got to give the woman some credit, just for sticking around after that deal on the Stone Building turned sour. There’s a lot of people wouldn’t do that.”

“She can’t be making much money,” Aino said. “I never see anyone over there.”
“I don’t think she’s getting rich, but you’d be surprised.” Corlynn sprayed glass cleaner on the counter top and wiped it off with a paper towel, her dimpled hand spinning in tight circles. “She does all right. It’s the artists that get the short end of the stick. These walls are paper thin, you know. I heard one of them Indian guys over there telling her off for selling his work and not sending him his assignment check.”

“Consignment,” Aino said. Minna’s interest perked, watching her mother. Aino looked away, embarrassed at having drawn attention to herself by correcting someone. She’d done a little reading, back when she thought she’d go out on her own. Being in the guild made things easy for her, in that way. Selling her work was never something she felt comfortable doing. With the other women taking turns covering the group’s table at craft fairs, she only had to go to every third or fourth fair. Aino made a point of keeping her expression neutral. As much as she didn’t care for Loretta, it was better not to get caught up in gossiping with Corlynn, who had once confided to Aino that before she dies, she plans to write down everything she overheard in that little coffee shop. Mind like a steel trap, she said, tapping her skull.

“I hear Len’s doing well with his races,” Corlynn said, mentioning that Wayne Paulet had stopped in. Since he’d been confined to a wheelchair in his twenties, Wayne had become the town’s biggest proponent for all things athletic, especially cross-country skiing, which used to be one of his sports. Aino found his resilience admirable, but Len was strangely bothered by it. “He just sat down and took it,” Len had said to her once. As if he’d had a choice.

Corlynn poured herself a cup of coffee. “You two must have a whole room full of trophies. What does he do with all those things?”
“Oh, I never see them once he gets them home.”

Corlynn grinned her approval. “You hate to see some of these guys that get all caught up on their trophies. It’s good to see your Len’s got enough sense to be humble. If you’re going to be on top, best not to make a target of yourself, eh?”

“Len’s never been one to make a show of himself,” Aino said.

Minna raised an eyebrow and mouthed, “Yeah, right.” Aino gave her a look and was glad to see that Corlynn hadn’t noticed. Len’s ego was something Aino preferred to keep under wraps. If no one else was talking about it, all the better.

“You must have done something right with him. He wasn’t always that modest.”

Corlynn smirked over her coffee cup.

Aino smiled. “I better take a loaf of rye home, since I’m here. Minna? You want anything else?” Minna wrinkled her nose and shook her head, declining the offer.

Corlynn flagged open a white paper bag and plucked the bread from a shelf. Standing at the counter, Aino dropped change from her fist, using her thumb to meter out the coins, letting only what Corlynn needed fall to the glass.

Outside, free of prying ears, Aino asked Minna what she had been trying to say. Minna only huffed, her breath curling up and disappearing in the winter air. Without asking whether Aino wanted to go into Lake Spirit, Minna shouldered the door open and stepped inside. The “will return at” sign was still posted in the front window, but the door was unlocked. Reluctantly, Aino followed. Her dissent died on her lips, flickering into a brief grin as Loretta greeted the two of them.

“Doing a little last-minute Christmas shopping?” she said.
“Just browsing,” Aino replied. Minna walked straight to the back of the store to a display of posters hung in plastic frames that thwacked against each other as she flipped through them. Aino brushed her fingers through staticky hair and avoided eye contact. The painting nearest her cost five hundred dollars, according to its tag, and she was sure that Loretta Du Bois could see straight through the fabric walls of her purse to the six dollars and forty-seven cents left inside.

Aino meandered toward the back of the store, maintaining a steady, if uneasy, stream of weather-related chitchat with Loretta. The posters were mostly Southwestern themed, with a heavy dose of R.C. Gorman and Tony Abeyta. Toward one end, the images shifted toward the standard Matisse and Monets.

“Can I help you find something in particular?” Loretta asked Minna, who said she was looking for something for her dorm room. To Aino, her daughter quickly added that Jeanne – Minna’s self-appointed godmother – was letting her pick out her Christmas present this year. “My walls are totally bare.”

“Jeanne Amundson?” Loretta asked, picking up the reference. Her unabashed eagerness embarrassed Aino; it reminded her how hard she’d tried to fit in with the guild, and how hard she was still trying. She didn’t want to feel that sympathetic connection with Loretta Du Bois. While Minna and Loretta compared notes about a painting that Jeanne had apparently purchased from Lake Spirit, Aino looked around for Morrison’s horizon line. She didn’t see it anywhere. Soon Minna’s attention was fixed on the prints again, resuming the steady thwack of the plastic frames.

“You’ve been in before,” Loretta said to Aino. “You were looking at the George Morrison, right?”
Aino’s shoulders shrank close. When she answered, there was a note of apology in her voice, as though she’d had no right to be there once, much less twice.

“You’re in the weaving guild,” Loretta’s words were laced with an interest that had never been there before. “I hear you’ve got Nova Farben coming up here to speak.”

“We’re inviting her,” Aino said, meaning don’t get your hopes up. When Loretta’s apparent excitement didn’t appear to temper itself, Aino explained, “We voted on it, but nothing’s set in stone.”

“Who’s Nova Farben?” Minna asked, turning away from the prints. Aino wished she’d seen which one her daughter had looked at longest. She wanted to ask which one she’d decided on, to beat Jeanne to the punch by making the purchase herself, but Loretta didn’t let a word in edgewise as she raved about Nova Farben’s tapestries.

“Why don’t you make any tapestries?” Minna asked her mother. Aino didn’t like the challenge in her daughter’s jutting hip and level gaze.

“That’s not for me,” Aino said, without meeting Minna’s stare.

When Minna finally broke her attempt at eye contact, she scanned the store and said to Loretta, “Why do you only carry paintings and sculptures?”

Aino felt her heart beating as though outside of her chest, exposed. She stood frozen as Loretta explained her Santa Fe vision for Kalevala Bay. Minna nodded as she listened, then said, “If that’s what you’re going for, then you should carry weavings, don’t you think?”

“Believe me,” Loretta said, “if I could get Nova Farben to let me carry some of her pieces, I’d do it in a second.”

“What about you, Mom?” Minna said. “Why don’t you bring in some of your-

“Because they’re only rag rugs. What use would they be in a place like this?”
"I’m just saying-"

"No." The syllable carried a reprimand, and a wake of silence. Finally, Aino smiled stiffly and said, "We should be going." Minna responded with a flick of an eyebrow.

"Keep me posted on this Nova Farben thing," Loretta said. "I’d love to hear her speak."

"I’m sure you’ll see it in the paper," Aino replied, with her hand already on the door. This time, when she and Minna got outside, she didn’t ask if her daughter had anything left to say.
Four

In Len's opinion, Christmas wasn't something to make a fuss about. The one expectation he had for the holiday was that it be peaceful. With another race in just a few days, he wanted time to focus and think about his strategy. Holidays weren't ever a big deal in his family. When he was young, his mother did more baking than usual, making pulla and piirakoita, but her extra time in the kitchen was a monthlong affair, not limited to a single day. As an adult, he and Aino had spent a few years playing Santa, but their only daughter was skeptical and precocious, and had figured out too soon about the man in red. Now that she was grown up, it was back to being just another day, except that Aino's parents would be coming for dinner. Even that was pushed back; they'd booked a family of guests and would have to wait until an extended check-out deadline. All of this was fine with Len. But the convention of staying home --everything was closed-- left Aino and Minna house-bound and irritable. He spent the afternoon skiing, which he extended with extra laps in spite of the ten-below temperature. When he got back, Minna was still on the couch with the television on, watching a whole stack of videos she'd rented from the Korner Stop out on the highway.

Toward evening, Len sprawled out across the living room floor while Aino pressed the heel of her hand into his calf, massaging a kink that had set in while he stood in the shower. When he was younger, he'd never had to stretch after a workout. Now, though, his body made it clear that neglect just wasn't going to fly. Aino worked her thumbs in circles, humming with a song in her head. On the television, two actors sat in lounge chairs on a
beach. They clinked umbrella drinks together in a toast. The credits rolled while an island-beat pop song played.

“You guys need a Blockbuster,” Minna said. “Everything they have at the Korner Stop is sooo cheesy.”

“So don’t watch it,” Len said.

Aino stopped humming. “I thought cheesy was good. What happened to those awful Seventies movies you used to watch?”

“That’s different. That’s like, so bad it’s funny. This is just bad. Like, I don’t know how someone could make a movie like that and not be embarrassed, bad. See, that’s what happens when you start making movies because you think people will like them, for the lowest common denominator. There’s no way something like that can’t end up crappy.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Aino said defensively. The kneading rhythm of her hands slowed and then picked up as she rubbed the heel of her hand deep into muscle. “There’s nothing wrong with making things because they sell.”

“Whatever,” Minna said.

Len let out a groan when Aino hit a tender spot. He told Minna to turn to the news, less because he wanted to watch it than to get the two of them to stop bickering. They talked around things, as if their conversation were really about movies and not about what was hanging in Aino’s weaving room closet. Why Minna couldn’t just come out and say what was on her mind was beyond him, but he wasn’t going to do it for her, and he’d said so. She still hadn’t told Aino about moving. The timing was never right, she’d said, even though she’d had days now, and a whole afternoon alone together.
Aino pressed her palm against the sole of Len’s foot, stretching the toes toward his shin. He let out a satisfied moan as the muscle lengthened and then relaxed. “You know just the trick,” he said. She lowered his foot to the floor. As he rolled over, she leaned down to kiss him, then patted his leg. Her hand rested on his thigh.

“And with her hands, she made him better, even better than before,” she sang, putting English words to a rhythm she learned from her grandmother. They were from the tale of Lemminkainen, the story Aino always hummed when she gave Len a massage. She said it was about a woman healer who resurrected her son.

Len propped himself up on his elbows. The warm weight of Aino’s palm spread down into his quadriceps. He looked at her hand. The fingertips were broad and flattened with use. A gardener’s hands, his mother would have said, meaning they knew work and purpose. Len slid his fingers under hers and raised their two hands, palm to palm. The tips of her fingers reached to his first joint. Lacing her fingers between his, Aino clasped Len’s hand tight. She was stronger than she looked.

On the television, a file tape showed an ore boat passing through the canal into Duluth’s harbor. The camera cut away to a close-up of Jeanne Amundson, the wife of Len’s boss.

“Look! It’s Jeanne!” Minna said. Aino pulled her hands away to fold them in her lap. She watched the TV with suspicion.

Jeanne spoke to the camera with a drawl she hadn’t lost even after living half her life outside Texas. “Because they don’t have any natural predators, zebra mussels reproduce unchecked, as you can see with the way they’ve blocked this water intake. The issue of invasive species is one we’ve been pushing at the DNR for years, but unfortunately it tends to
take something like this to draw public attention." Her lips kept moving silently for several seconds before the shot cut back to the newsroom. The anchor looked young, probably a reporter who got roped into working Christmas. A boxed photo displayed a beer can covered with the tiny striped mussels.

“I bet she was reading from a script,” Aino said.

“She’s not stupid,” Minna retorted.

“I didn’t say she was. But I wouldn’t be surprised if she elbowed some people out of the way just to get her face on television. Who made her the expert?”

“Her degree in marine biology. I think she’s qualified to talk about this.”

“Oh, a marine biologist,” Aino over-enunciated the words to give them the sound of lah-dee-dah.

“What do you have against her?”

Len cut in. “You mind? I’m trying to watch the news.” He was tired of hearing Aino and Minna bicker. It was true that Jeanne liked to spoil Minna. She didn’t have kids of her own. For a woman who said she didn’t like competition, Aino took every opportunity to cut down this rival for her daughter’s love. Jeanne had it easy, of course. She took Minna to movies and bought her gifts. She never had to be the one to say no. When Len’s wife and daughter lapsed into taut silence, he sighed and lay back, resting his head in the basket of his fingers. At last it was quiet.

Aino leaned out across the floor beside Len, resting a hand on his chest. It fluttered in time with the rhythm of the song she was humming again, a discordant, chant-like beat. He let her snuggle close. Seeing her content like this reminded him that he’d done something extraordinary. One cold May afternoon, twenty-some years before, he’d pulled her from
Lake Superior. He’d been out on a training run and stopped on the bridge over the Tuonela River, just where it passes over the falls. Jogging in place, he counted his pulse, as he always did, looking out over the water. He saw her stride, fully clothed, into the water. When she dunked under, he lost his count. She came up, floating on her back. He kept one eye on her and one on his watch. When her head slipped under the waves and didn’t come up in the count of his pulse, he’d skipped the math of his heart beat and ran across the highway, down the beach, and into the water. In the past, he’d been unable to do anything about his mother’s death, his father’s suicide, his brother leaving town, but when Aino needed him, he was there. That single moment had tipped the scales of his life. He had lost three and won one, but that was enough to make a difference.

A car’s headlights swept across the living room wall. As Aino got up off the floor, she warned Minna not to let her grandmother do the dishes. The way she said it, it sounded like she was worried about her mother breaking things, but Len knew that his wife only wanted to see her daughter assume responsibility. According to her, the saddest soul is a person with no responsibilities. They have no ties, she said, nothing to hold them in a place. And Minna was a girl who resisted all tethers.

The three of them stood by the door as Aino’s parents walked in. “I thought they’d never leave!” Chuck said, referring to the family of guests. As he stepped out of his boots, he gave Minna a handled shopping bag of presents to carry to the tree. Marja-Liisa handed her granddaughter a covered pie plate.

“It was that woman,” Marja-Liisa said in carefully enunciated English; the roundness of her vowels and the softness of her “s” betrayed her foreign roots. “She wanted video of all
of her children singing Christmas carols by fireplace, and there was one boy he sang it wrong. So she made them start over. Ten times! It was ridiculous.”

Aino took their coats and disappeared into the bedroom.

“It was more than ten times,” Chuck complained. Before Minna could slip off with the shopping bag, he reached in to take out a bottle of Absolut and gave it to Len as if it were a gift for the host. Len only drank beer.

“What was he doing wrong?” Minna asked.


“He was just singing the Batman version. You know, *Jingle Bells, Batman smells, Robin laid an egg.*”

“That was it? That stinker!” Marja-Liisa said.

“He’s a kid, for crying out loud. I don’t know what that woman was thinking.” Chuck scratched his earlobe. “Say, Len, don’t suppose you’ll be…”

“Coming right up,” Len said. He broke the seal on the bottle. Marja-Liisa shot a glare at her husband, and with the sweep of her eyes, the bluster they’d walked in with fell into a pall that lasted through dinner. The five of them said little as they ate, passing ham and mashed potatoes and green beans around the table with minimal comment, which was just fine with Len. It was better than the alternative. After dinner, they remained around the table. Aino started coffee. Her mother occasionally mentioned the deaths and births she’d read about in the *Citizen*; she and Aino went back and forth recounting how each was related to this person or that. “That’s Sylvie’s cousin?” Aino might say. “By marriage,” Marja-Liisa might answer, and then explain how so-and-so was really a Luokka but she’d been raised by the Salos and so on. Chuck sipped vodka from a juice glass. Minna sat with her rump on the
very front edge of her seat, her back rounded in a deep curve. Her chin hung low to her chest, sullen.

“How’s that Ford running?” Chuck’s question was directed at Len, although he spoke to his glass, keeping his eyes trained on the up-and-down run of his fingers on its sides.

“Can’t complain,” Len said. As Aino served coffee and the pie that Marja-Liisa had brought, Len told Chuck about the adjustments he’d made to the timing and explained how the clutch had needed tightening. “Runs like a clock,” he said.

“How about we take a look under the hood?” Chuck suggested. Len declined.

Marja-Liisa asked Minna about school. Len glanced over at his daughter. She looked back at him, then shrugged a shoulder and said it was good.

“Good, good,” Marja-Liisa said, satisfied with Minna’s answer. “You should get a good education.” Wagging a finger at Aino, she added, “I tried to tell that to this one here.”

Marja-Liisa nodded curt approval at her granddaughter. “I think you should be a doctor.”

Minna bit the corner of her lip and raised her eyebrows. Aino cut in with a sharp look at her mother, “She doesn’t want to be a doctor. And besides, college isn’t the only way.” Len nudged his daughter.

Minna opened her mouth, but Marja-Liisa pushed, “How does she know if she doesn’t try? She’s good with science.” To Minna, she said again, “Your great-grandmother was well known for giving cures. She had no money for school, but she had her ways. She was good at it.”

“Yeah, that was her,” Minna said.

“So, maybe you’re good at it, too. That’s what I’m saying, how could you know?”
Chuck sipped his drink and looked to Len for commiseration. Len looked away.

Trucks were enough common ground to share with this passive man with a tangle of exposed veins on his nose.

Minna pushed her chair back from the table to make room to cross her legs. She slung one arm over the back of her chair.

"Why don’t you tell your grandmother about your major," Len said, lacing his suggestion with the tone of an order.

Minna lolled her head toward Len, her chin still pulled low to her chest. She looked up at him from under her eyebrows. "Why bother? Sounds like they’ve got it all figured out."

At that, Marja-Liisa’s neck stiffened, her pride hurt. Aino folded her arms across her chest.

"I’m only suggesting," Marja-Liisa said. "I said it would be nice. As it is, we have to drive this way or that way for a doctor. If you were a doctor, we wouldn’t have to. And with the new golf course, it would be just like being a doctor anywhere else."

"We don’t play golf, Mom."

"Who’s building a golf course?" Minna said, straightening up in her seat and trying obviously to change the subject.


His wife’s forehead relaxed. Her trust in him sometimes left him feeling nervous.

"Anyway," Marja-Liisa said. "Even if there’s no golf course, it’s like a family tradition."

"One person makes a family tradition?" Minna said.

“There were no bootleggers,” Marja-Liisa shot an unsubtle glare at her husband and his juice glass.

“Who was a bootlegger?” Minna said, her interest peaked. Her mouth hung in an open grin.

“The so-called doctor. She ran a flophouse during the Depression.”

“It was before that,” Marja-Liisa said.

“Ha! So you admit it!” Aino grinned in collusion with her daughter. Len didn’t understand them. The lines of their allegiance switched without warning. They were like spinning magnets, alternately pulling together and apart.

“Pah!” Marja-Liisa stacked plates as she rose from the table, collecting silverware with a professional’s haste.

Aino picked up all the glasses but Chuck’s and motioned for her daughter to hurry to the sink. Minna sneaked across the kitchen and sidled up beside her broad-hipped grandmother, playfully edging her out.

Marja-Liisa rifled through drawers. “Where does a person find a dish towel around here?” Aino dug a flour sack towel from a closet and shooed her mother away.

Chuck finished his drink and drummed his fingers on the table. Len leaned his chair back to reach the newspaper from the sideboard. The date was from some time in November, but he didn’t mind. Reading wasn’t the point. He scanned an article about the local high school’s homecoming game.

“The Kloverrs,” Chuck said, shaking his head at the team’s new name. When Kalevala Bay consolidated with three nearby towns four years earlier, the controversy over
their title gridlocked every city’s council meetings for months. No one wanted to be swallowed up into another town’s identity, so in the end they all lost out, settling on a nine-word compromise, Kalevala Bay-Orlender-Voyageur Bay-Roland River High School, the Klovers.

“They said consolidation was supposed to improve the sports teams,” Chuck complained.

Len said, “I’m not surprised. They get bigger, they get put up against bigger schools that have more money.”

Marja-Liisa, who was hovering over the table in a refusal to sit down while someone else was working, tsked at the mention of the school. “How can you get a good education in a school that can’t even spell its own name? It’s a wonder Minna was able to go to college at all, not to mention medical school.”

“Are you back on that again?” Minna said.

“She doesn’t want to be a doctor,” Aino insisted. She flopped a damp towel over her shoulder and put a hand on her hip, staring down her mother. Minna turned to catch Aino’s eye, and for a moment they seemed to have settled into their solidarity. It might have held, too, if Aino hadn’t opened her mouth. “Have you ever thought of what it would be like for her to be a doctor here? You know how people are. The head that sticks up gets lopped off.”

Minna wiped a sponge over the counter, dropped it into the gaping mouth of a ceramic frog beside the sink. With crisp finality, she said, “I have my own plans for my life, thanks for asking.” Before she was even out of the room, Aino and Marja-Liisa were knee-deep in a new argument about who had been pushing Minna in the wrong direction.
Chuck nodded out toward the garage and suggested a look under the hood. Len didn’t refuse.

***

Aino knew the Pauleteer 25-K was a shoo-in for Len. He trained on the course daily, and in the ten years of its run, he had won seven times. The race was organized by Wayne Paulet, the youngest of the three brothers who owned Paulet Brothers’ Funeral Home. Better suited to being a sports caster than a mortician, Wayne sold insurance on the side – Aino suspected he did this more for his mental health than for financial need. After the alpine ski accident that left him paralyzed from the waist down, he’d kept himself busy planning this ski race, sponsoring a pee wee hockey team, and organizing a lumberjack competition each July. Aino remembered him from school as the hockey forward who broke her brother’s school record for assists. Wayne had apologized to her when he did. It was only two weeks after Bryan died. She remembered Wayne standing with his hands clean and folded, greeting people as they passed through the door to the funeral. She felt sorry for him. His elbows jutted out at odd angles and his leg shook with a teenaged boy’s urge for constant motion. And every time someone died, he had to stand in that doorway.

Wayne motored over to Aino and Len as they crossed the Tuonela Park playground. Plastic flags in crayola colors lined the route up to where it entered the woods and sloped up in a gradual rise before jutting up to the hill where the hanging tree stood. Bright colors and loud, pulsing music were enough to distract Aino from the eerie outline of the oak above the cliff face, but she had to pat Len on the arm to bring his attention to Wayne as he neared.
“I went ahead and sent the press release to the Citizen,” he said, holding his palms out, his thumbs like L’s to frame the headline: “Who’s Saarinen now?” Wayne chuckled at his pun as he shook Len’s hand with a from-the-elbow pump. Len opened and closed a safety pin on the corner of his race bib and flashed a grin.

“I’m kidding, of course,” he added, unnecessarily. Whenever Aino talked to Wayne, she got the feeling he knew about a secret camera poised somewhere behind her head. He smiled too much, like a performer. Len shifted his weight from one foot to the other. He’d already slipped into his pre-race meditativeness before Wayne came over and seemed agitated at having to carry on a conversation.

“Last year we’re doing this, eh?” Wayne said.

“Why do you say that?” Len was defensive.

“This is where they’re putting that golf course. The city already sold the land.”

“They sold it?” Aino said. She and Len had let their subscription to the paper lapse—both insisting that it was the other person’s job to send in the check—but she couldn’t believe she’d been that out of touch.

“It was a good financial move,” Wayne said. “With the tax base going down the tubes, we just can’t afford to keep things up the way we used to.”

Aino’s brow pulled tight. Len didn’t even look surprised. He squinted off over the tops of the Norway pines.

On the other side of the small, milling crowd, Aino spotted the woman she’d talked to in Tannin Falls. A pair of glasses was perched on her nose as she hunched toward her son’s back to pin on his number.
Wayne smiled like a sports caster at the imagined camera behind Aino’s and Len’s heads, wishing luck as he steered around them. As he greeted another skier, Aino hoped that Len didn’t notice that he used the same *I put your name in the Citizen* line on her, too.

When the racers took off, disappearing into the woods in a bobbing, single mass like a Chinese dragon, Aino found herself standing next to Dusty’s mother again. She’d seen him take off toward the head of the pack, just behind Len. The course wound through the woods in one long lap, so it would be a long wait until the racers returned.

“There’s hot cider in the warming shack,” Aino offered. The woman smiled and introduced herself as Betty. Aino made a point of saying *my name is* in an attempt to avoid the usual attention that introductions brought.

“Now that’s an unusual name,” Betty said as they joined the end of a line at the concession stand. The floor of the warming house was a thick mat of rubber. Red-cheeked kids walked around on skates, coming in from the ice rink outside.

“It’s Finnish,” Aino explained. Her name was a curse, requiring constant explanation. Somehow her brother had gotten off easy: Bryan. She wondered if her life would have been different if she’d been a Jane or a Pamela. Minna never complained about her name, but kids were different anymore. You never knew what would end up a name these days, the way people made up spellings and borrowed random nouns to attach to their children.

The cider was a powdered mix that a teenager – Madison, her tag read – poured into a paper cup filled with water from a one-hundred-cup coffee maker. It tasted thin and sugary, more like a Jolly Rancher than like fruit, but it was hot, and better than the concession stand coffee that tasted like dirty water. As far as Aino was concerned, serving weak coffee was an advertisement of personal failure. When Aino’s grandmother told her about the hard times in
Finland after the war, when she had to wear rags in her shoes, she said the one thing she wouldn’t reduce herself to was drinking Rio, the cheap beans that came with sticks and hulls mixed in. Good, strong coffee was the elixir that made it possible to revive herself enough to make it through the dark winter.

Betty talked about her son’s ski season with an expressiveness that almost crossed the line into being giddy. “You don’t know what this has done for him,” she said. Betty taught fourth grade and peppered her speech with words like “self esteem” and “good cooperator” when she talked about the turnaround she’d seen in her son. “He was never much interested in team sports,” Betty explained, adding after a pause, “He’s always been a very sensitive boy.” Aino nodded sympathetically, catching the edge behind that word. *Sensitive* was what people called Loretta Du Bois.

“It’s good to see you’ve helped him find something he’s good at,” Aino said. She couldn’t seem to do the same for her daughter. Minna never let her.

Betty sipped her cider thoughtfully. “He’s like a whole new boy.”

“That’s the power of a mother,” Aino said. “My grandmother used to tell me a story about a man named Lemminkainen, who was boastful and caused all kinds of problems. Well, his mother found him murdered in the river of the dead, chopped to pieces.”

“How horrible! This is a story your grandmother told you?”

“I wasn’t that young,” Aino said, “and I needed some reforming myself at the time. Anyway, his mother is able to save him. She rakes up all the pieces and puts him back together, and he’s a new man. Upstanding, virtuous, the whole sha-bang.”

Betty’s grin was politely skeptical. Aino could see the fourth-grade teacher’s disapproval in her tight lips when she said, “All’s well that ends well, I suppose.”
Aino swirled the sugary residue of powdered cider in the bottom of her cup. It was the color of the unpainted wood of her grandmother’s loom. She remembered how the old woman, short and spry, could swing her straight legs over the bench when she sat down to weave. After she got Aino started, though, she sat close by in a rocking chair, singing in rhythm with its motion. The story of Lemminkainen’s resurrection was one of her favorites: *and she made him better, even better than before.* It was a runo, a Kalevala story told in song, like they used to be. Her grandmother beat their rhythm into dishwashing, weaving, braiding her hair, until that cadence seeped into Aino movements. At the time, she didn’t like the harsh, unmelodic sounds, more chant than song. The words had only made her think of Bryan. Over time, her memory of the words grew fuzzy, but she hadn’t forgotten the stories, and their rhythm was a pulsing undercurrent inside her.

After all that Betty told her in the warming shack, Aino couldn’t feel bad when Dusty came in barreling around the corner neck and neck with Len. Len was heading toward the chute with that push that had won him dozens of races when Dusty skimmed by. The boy was scrawny and fast, all arms and legs. Coming in behind him, Len looked like a big, ambling bear. Aino watched him cross the finish line, then lean forward with his hands on his knees. A string of snot hung halfway to the ground as he glided to a stop. He blew his nose into the snow, straightened up, squinted back at the finish line and said, “Fuck!”

Before Len could mention breakfast, Aino let him back out of their usual post-race routine, telling him it seemed a waste to be going out to eat when they were so close to home. Chest heaving for a recovery of air, he let out a heavy cloud of breath and nodded in agreement. He was looking up over the tops of the Norway pines again.
“Well, how about that?” Betty said as she passed by, following Dusty’s bee line to a table stacked with Power Bars and bananas. “One and two.”

Aino smiled and congratulated her. After Betty walked away, Aino explained to her husband, “That’s Dusty’s mom,” pointing him out as “the one in orange” rather than as the winner. Len took a long look at the boy, responded with a terse *hm*, and accepted his second-place medal with stoic aplomb. When they returned home, he went straight to the basement. She hoped he might finally take care of the wax in the washing machine, but he didn’t. For two hours, Aino listened to dull, sporadic clunks and thuds from Len’s weights.
Five

Len turned his skis out in a herringbone stride, pushing to one edge of the groomed trail and then to the other. He was nearing the crest. It was twenty below zero, but cold wasn’t enough to compromise his training, especially not after losing to a kid. Twice. His face contorted with effort as his poles squealed against the snow. When he reached open ground at the top of the hill, he stopped to check his time. It wasn’t any worse than the last time around, but he wasn’t getting any faster, and the competition was.

Counting his pulse, he squinted over glaring snow to the swath of blue beyond. The lake’s eastern edge looked impossibly distant. The shadow of the hill where he stood extended far out onto the lake in the afternoon sun. It was only four-thirty, but the January days were short, and in his rush to get out to the trail after work, he’d left his headlamp hanging on its hook in the basement beside the washing machine. He still hadn’t had time to clean out the wax from its sides – which wouldn’t have been such a big job, except that what he’d washed was a tube of Klister: sticky red wax for warm snow. Before he left, Aino had stood by the door with her arms crossed as he pulled on his ski boots. Cleaning was such an issue with her.

Before he continued across the clearing at the top of the hill, Len took one last assessing glance over the course, eyeing each turn for a place where he could have gained more time. He’d skied the Pauleteer perfectly, but that just wasn’t good enough. He
readjusted his wool hat, hard with an armor of frozen sweat, and pushed on toward the other side of the clearing.

Though the snowcover was two feet deep in places, the roots of the hanging tree were bare and exposed. That wind had never knocked it over was a wonder. Every time he passed the tree, he considered what it would take to uproot it. Cutting it down with a chainsaw would take five minutes, but it wouldn’t really be gone. The suckers ran too deep. With all the fuss over the golf course that was going to be put in on this land, the Citizen had run a story about the tree. An arborist from down in Duluth said it was more than five hundred years old. A spokesman for the Grand Portage Chippewa said the tribe’s lawyers would fight the developers if they tried to remove the tree. It was sacred, they said. Cursed would be the word Len would use. He stepped off the trail, sliding over hard-crusted snow that wore down to bare rock as he neared the tree. Spearing his poles into the quick-release on his bindings, he took off his skis. They slid on the iced snow toward the edge of the cliff, but he caught them before they went too far.

Len crouched at the base of the trunk, holding his skis under the crook of an arm. His hands were covered with thick black mitts – lobster mitts – and seemed primordial as he ran one over a rope-like root. This touch was his first, and it was padded with thinsulate and leather. He didn’t dare expose his flesh, though. Already he could feel the wind biting the skin around his eyes, covered only with wrap-around sunglasses. Through his mitt, the root felt the same as the rock it clung to. In a crook at the root’s base where it branched out from the tree, a small pouch was nestled. Len picked it up and smelled it. Tobacco, just like the article said. The Chippewa leave it here as a kind of offering. He hadn’t believed it, but there it was. In all the time he’d lived here, he’d never seen anyone dropping off the little pouches,
but there were three or four of them here, and a pack of American Spirits on the other side of
the tree, maybe from someone who didn’t quite get what they were supposed to do. Len
didn’t know any better than the American Spirit guy, or woman, whoever it was. The article
said it was an offering to the tree’s power, or it gave the tree power or something like that.
This idea had made him uneasy, that there were people out there whose belief was fortifying
this tree.

A gust of wind got him back on his feet, but he didn’t head back to the trail. He stood
next to the trunk, looked up at the knotted branches. They were skinny, for being so old.
Reaching up with his free hand, he grabbed hold of the lowest branch and pulled his feet off
the ground, testing its strength. It held. Obviously it held, he thought. Thirty years wasn’t
enough to sap a tree that spanned generations. As he let himself down, his foot slipped on an
ice patch. His skis fell loose from the crook of his arm as he reached out to catch himself, but
he hit hard, landing on top of them. Even as he stood, he could feel the tender edges of a
bruise on his hip. The skis weren’t damaged, but one of the bindings didn’t catch quite right.
It held, but it didn’t seem to want to release. But that would get him where he needed to go.
Home wasn’t far.

The light was fading, but he wanted to get in one more loop. He could do better than
the last. Home was close enough that he could stop for his headlamp. As he slid down the
rutted tracks, descending the embankment, Len glanced up at the dark ring of spruce that
encircled his house. He knew the physical reality of twenty below: once you step inside, it’s
hard to convince yourself to go back out. Instead, he took his chance on the flat gray of
twilight. He could buy a few minutes by cutting across the river to the trailhead where he
started his clock. Slipping his skis out of their tracked rut, he veered left just before he
reached the bridge and felt the rough track jostle his bruised hip. With a rush of adrenaline, he careened down a roughshod trail to follow the frozen river.

Twilight flattened the river’s course. Snow-covered rocks and thin edges of currents too swift to freeze melted into a gray wash. Len stretched his eyes wide to keep his lashes from sticking as he slid down the course, legs soft and bent to catch the brunt of a sudden change in the uneven surface. He didn’t have to stride, only to allow himself to trust gravity. It was a natural pull, this descent to open water.

He heard trickling, too soon to be the falls. It was distant, almost soundless. With his eyelashes clinging in the corners of his eyes, he struggled to see the turn-off back to the trail. Len focused on the embankment. His muscles were already cold from a moment’s disuse. As he shifted his weight to change direction away from the lake’s pull, the river’s gurgle seemed louder. He heard it like a soft voice. A cavernous pop sounded from below, then a creaking moan. Len stopped himself with his poles, rubbing a mitt over his eyes to separate the lashes. He was only feet from the bank, where a thin trail would take him past a fallen poplar and up to the course. Listening, he inched forward, and broke through.

* * *

Aino’s hand flew across the washing machine’s open lid, slamming it shut with the echo of a clang. She turned to lean against the machine, softly knocking the white tip of a knuckle against closed lips. The basement smelled like heated wax. Its cement floor was littered with a dust of shavings that grew slick where Len’s shoes had smoothed the scraped wax to a high polish. Circles of blue and white and green spotted the floor under his waxing
iron, still plugged in where he had left it in his hurry to get out to the trail. Aino yanked the plug from the wall on her way out.

Upstairs, Aino looked out the back window from her weaving room toward the edge of the woods. With the ceiling light on, it was too dark to see out to Len’s trailhead, so she cupped her hands around her face and peered to see if he was returning. The glass was cold against her skin. She wasn’t sure exactly when he’d left, but she knew the rhythm of his pace. He was late.

To prompt Len into action, she’d taken all her own laundry to a coin-op over the weekend. Len, in response, wore the same two pairs of underwear for a week straight: one for skiing, one for work. Through all of this, neither of them mentioned the washing machine. But she needed to use it. Dying rags at the coin-op wasn’t an option; the colorant would leave stains. The thought of disappointing Sylvie mortified her, though. She could hear her already, “We’re a cooperative, Aino. We all have to do our share.” Sylvie always seemed to ask more of Aino than anyone else, to the point that she felt put upon a pedestal constructed of her own labor. And still, she did what she was asked. It was hard not to, with Sylvie there always reminding her: you won’t regret the things you did, only what you didn’t do. Besides, working contributions were admirable; asking for help was not.

Aino’s breath crystallized on the window. Len was nowhere in sight. With a fingernail, she scratched a line through the frost. She remembered sitting on the school bus, etching her name in a circle of her breath. It would always be gone by the next ride, melted away. Aino pressed the edge of her fist against the glass, then topped off a baby’s foot with toes by pressing the tip of her finger into the frost. When Minna was young, Aino had taught her how to breathe baby feet onto windows. Even then, Minna had been unimpressed with
winter and its tricks. She was gone again now, and slipping away. She’d seemed so frustrated when she said goodbye after Christmas, struggling out to the car with the huge black American Tourister that she insisted on carrying herself. It had been snowing, and Aino knew how slick roads made her nervous. She hoped it was only the highways. On the window, ice crystals ferned into the space left by Aino’s fingers.

Aino sat on the loom’s bench. Two feet of a tãkänä stretched in a pattern of navy and white, the beginning of a rocky coastline strewn with skirts and necklaces. Aino ran her palm over it to feel the texture, then took its edge between her fingers. The web was a little too tight, from overzealous beating. She was almost up to the shoreline: water for the salmon maiden. Tacked to the top beam of the loom was a grid-drawn draft showing the silhouette of Aino – the mythical Aino – standing naked on the shore, with her clothing behind her. There was no time to work on this now, though. She had rags to tend to.

Len must have taken extra loops, Aino decided, or he was skiing up and down the same hills again. Whatever was keeping him, she wouldn’t wait all night. If she couldn’t use the washing machine, then she’d have to make do. She decided on the bathtub. There would be a way to clean away the dye. Most stains, after all, weren’t permanent. And with the time Len would have to wait for the shower, he could work on the Klister.

Aino grabbed a box of RIT periwinkle blue, then turned on the hot tap to fill the bathtub. Sitting on its porcelain edge, she watched the water gurgle, flowering up with the surge of the faucet. Rising steam was a welcome change from dry winter air. Droplets clung to the pearled pink tiles that Len’s mother had chosen. Aino had never met her. These tiles were all she knew of her mother-in-law’s tastes. She imagined her a disappointed woman, trying too hard. The pink pearl bathroom with its kissing fish on the wall seemed out of place
in this house of straight, dark-stained wood. Maybe it was the woman’s weak heart that made
Aino think of her as sensitive, too delicate to live among the glacial scars of this rocky place.
Aino bore this dead woman inside her. She kept her close, her presence a reminder of the
dangers of letting too much out, or too much in.

Aino pulled open the cardboard box of dye and ripped its paper lining. Acrid dust
rose from its opening. This was her favorite part about dying: she tipped the box, letting just
a dash of powder fall into the water. It bloomed in a blue explosion. Color spread like an oil
slick across the surface, then slowly sank and melted with the spreading cloud until the water
was the thin shade of dusk on Lake Superior’s eastern edge. Then, with the drop of more dye
and then more, the color deepened, as though she were descending rock shoals to the lake’s
cold stronghold bottom.

Dropping an armload of rags all at once into the water, Aino steeped the fabric in the
dye bath. She pushed down bubbled pockets with a stainless steel spoon and lifted a tangled
mat to check the dye’s progress. The water cooled as she stirred, steam dissipating in small
curls.

In the kitchen, Aino filled a kettle to stir heat into the bath. The wall clock read
quarter to six. She drummed her fingers on the pot as she held it under the tap. Len should be
home. When he’d left, she hadn’t paid much attention to his goodbye. The kettle took forever
to boil. It didn’t help that she lifted the lid every twenty seconds to check on it. A watched
pot, she thought. When the whistle finally blew, she dumped the water into the bath and
decided Len wouldn’t be home any sooner with her sitting around waiting for him, just like
he wouldn’t clean the wax from the washing machine any more quickly with nagging. She
went back to her loom, stepping over the bench to sit down. That step was like an immersion,
crossing over into her own space: the only part of her life that she controlled completely. Aino studied the pattern. Leaning the weight of her foot onto a treadle to open the shed, she began weaving the water’s edge.

* * *

The broken quick-release on Len’s binding had iced over with the first rush of frost when the air hit. Len scraped ice from the plastic hinge to get free. With his other ski lost under the ice and this one broken, he was better off on foot. It took too long for him to do this, too long to make his way to the bank. He knew the trail would be easier to follow, but the distance he’d have to go back seemed too far. Straight up the hill through the woods, it would be only a half mile. A two-foot base covered the tangle of underbrush, and the snow’s frozen top would make for easy walking. And it was, at first.

For the first hundred yards or so the ground was mostly flat, but the hillside he had to climb faced north, and the snow had crusted in patches and layers. The surface held for one step. He fell through with another. The hard plastic of his boots cut through too easily, sending his boot down sometimes a few inches, sometimes a foot. His shivering eased as he climbed, or at least it seemed to. Progress was slow. Soon he was sweating hard. He felt like he was burning up, his fingers like coals in the soaked-and-frozen lobster claw mitts.

When he stopped, letting his backside fall to dent a seat for himself in the iced-over surface, he looked down the hill to the river. He could see his skis there, and his poles. He wondered why he left them, why he didn’t just keep going. It’s not that far, he thought. I should really go back and get them. Someone was standing there, at the river’s edge. A
woman, maybe a child. She looked at his skis and then up at him. “Take your jacket off,” she told him. She was short, stunted looking, with limbs that didn’t seem right for her body.

“You’ll feel better if you cool off.” Her voice was clear, for being so far away. She was right. He did feel better with his jacket off. This climbing was making him so hot.

Len looked down at his foot and remembered why he’d sat down. The boot was stuck, having broken through to a matted tangle of tansy weeds and fallen branches.

“Can you help me?” he called to the woman. She said she couldn’t. He nodded and said he understood. Len bent toward the hole his boot had made. With the light fading, it was hard to see what was holding his foot down. He reached in with the lobster claw mitt to brush away the loose snow. The clasp had broken and was hanging loose, caught in the underbrush as if in a net. “Your mother told you not to go searching for a place among your betters,” the woman said. “And now she can’t help you.” Her body was crooked and knobby. He remembered her now, death’s daughter. “Take off your gloves,” she said.

Len puzzled on his gloved hand. He didn’t remember it being black and thick. He remembered having more fingers. “I’m wearing mittens,” he thought, the idea occurring to him only with effort. He pulled off a mitt and reached into the hole to free the clasp. His foot came loose, pulling free from the boot. Len continued up the hill toward home, wearing only one boot and one stocking, his hands bare.

* * *

When Aino looked up from her weaving, she’d made water and a shoreline, and the bare legs of a girl wading out from shore. The rags, she thought, and rushed to extract her
legs from the loom’s bench. Remembering that she hadn’t heard Len come in, she wondered where he could be. As she neared the bathroom, she heard the high hiss of water moving through the pipes. Had she left the tap running? It was only a trickle that she heard, nothing serious.

“Dammit, Len!” she said when she found him lounging in the bath. How like him, stubborn enough to dye his body blue rather than scrape away Klister. “Get out of there!” His chest was bare, but leggings still covered his knees. They rose up out of the water, one at an odd angle, thrown off kilter from a foot propped against the wall, where it had bumped the tap. A thin stream flowed from the faucet into a bath kept level by the drain plate’s audible leak. His face was turned toward the wall. “Len?” Aino said, stepping close enough to cup her hand under his chin to turn his face toward hers. The skin was cold.

When the paramedics arrived, Aino met them at the door.

“I think he’s dead.” She led them to where he lay in tepid blue water, head lolled against the tiles. Two EMTs hurried past her. Their words mixed with the hiss of the tap, still trickling into the tub. Faint pulse. Temperature: ninety point one. Okay, on three.

Stepping back into the hallway, Aino let the gurney through. She tasted blood from where the pressure of her knuckle slit her lip against her teeth. She asked the paramedics what they were doing, but they didn’t answer her. They positioned an oxygen mask around Len’s face and covered him with a metallic blanket.

“Take that off his face!” Aino’s throat felt dry. Her voice scratched out of her. They didn’t respond. “Why is that blanket on his face?” she grabbed the arm of one of the men as he skirted past her.
"We’re preserving his body heat, ma’am. Will you be riding or following?"

"I’ll follow. He’s not dead?" She scurried behind them as they pushed through the kitchen. The man kicked a pair of shoes out of his way and said, "Ain’t dead till he’s warm and dead."
Six

Aino first met her husband when he pulled her out of Lake Superior. He rescued her, or so he believed. And maybe it was true, she couldn’t say what might have happened if he hadn’t come along. She didn’t believe she was in need of rescue, but he’d seemed so overwhelmed when he pulled her from the water and, later, so proud of the result that she just let him believe it. It hadn’t been so long ago that she’d had that same flat-eyed stare of a person who’s seen more of grief than they could take at one time. Breaking free of that stare was the reason she’d gone to the lake that day.

Aino had always had a fascination with her namesake. When she was young, she believed her fate was to walk into the water and never come out. For years, she’d dreamed of worlds under water. Then, the year she turned seven, Aino’s family bought an old summer camp to start a north woods resort. From the first visit to look at the run-down log structures, Aino looked past squealing pipes and bats’ nests in the rafters out to the frozen expanse of the lake, thinking: This is it, my new home. As the family packed up their suburban home and her then fifteen-year-old brother complained about leaving his friends, Aino imagined her new life, dipping under the waves to spin around the bottom of the lake (knowing better than other fish the danger of hooks and motors) then returning for dinner with her family. Slipping among the water weeds, she’d be deaf to arguments about her brother’s friends and what he did with them.
The first time Aino stood at the end of the weathered dock, prepared to jump off, Bryan stood behind her. “You know there aren’t any salmon in there,” he said.

“So?” Aino said, jutting out her lip and her tongue. Bryan was smoking a cigarette and stewing, as he had been since they’d unpacked the car.

“So, I’m telling you, if you go down there and turn into a salmon, you won’t have any friends.” Aino considered this a moment, giving Bryan’s words real thought. After all, he was the only one who had taken her seriously.

“I don’t care,” she decided, taking into account the fact that she didn’t have any friends out of the water, either, since they’d just moved. Bryan shrugged one shoulder and flicked his cigarette into the lake. When she jumped off the dock, she leapt feet first and felt long fingers of weeds brush against her bare legs. Her head broke the surface screaming. Bryan didn’t laugh, but Aino could see the quivering edge of his smile threatening the edge of his mouth.

“It’s just weeds,” he assured her, and Aino ducked under the water again, waving her arms to hold herself under the surface. She hovered among the water grasses with her eyes open. It was different from the stinging blue of the pool at the Y where she’d taken swimming lessons. It had looked blue from above, but from under the surface it was like chamomile tea streaked with sunlight and speckled with dust. That day, Aino had stayed under the water until her lungs burned, watching with disappointment her unchanging, yellow-cast fingers.

After Bryan died, she’d developed a fear of dunking her head under water. The warped sound and streaming sunlight felt too close to what she knew of death. Once, she’d let herself dip just the back of her head in the water. Standing up to her chest in the lake after
When Aino floated in the lake that day, her ears immersed in water-muted quiet, she listened to the sound of her own fear. Silence, and the rolling ticks of rounded pebbles shifting in the waves. It was short-lived, interrupted by the splashing rush of Len racing into the water. She remembered his warm hands, the strength of his arms when he carried her to the shore. To warm up, they sat in the Volvo, sometimes talking, sometimes not. Their clothes soaked the front seats. By the time Aino left for home that day, though, her denim jeans were dry, and she knew that her rescue had meant something to Len.

With the news that Len’s core temperature had stabilized, Aino was told she should go home to rest. “You won’t see the change,” the doctor told her. “But you can be assured he’s out of the woods.”

Wary, Aino studied the hard, singed-looking skin on Len’s cheeks, the tubes running into his nose and mouth. “When will he wake up?”

“He’ll sleep through the night. Something you should consider yourself.”
When Aino got home, she felt uncertain how she’d arrived there, as though the drive had occurred without her being present for it. Len’s hypothermia was under control, but the frostbite was an unknown. The doctor said he had hope – the warm bath that complicated his hypothermia had the opposite effect on his frozen skin – but Aino still worried when he assured her they never amputate until they know whether the tissue will survive. She’d seen the hard, white skin on his feet and the blackened tips of his fingers. To her, it looked dead. The doctor said they couldn’t know that, not for six weeks. “The body is a resilient thing,” she’d said. “It wants to survive.”

The kitchen was a mess. The paramedics’ gritty footprints dried in a layer of gravel and road salt, leaving the sheer, ash gray of evaporated snow on the checkered linoleum. The remnants of a moment upstirred and abandoned: opened mail in a loose pile on the Formica tabletop, a rag rug bunched among a mess of salt-stained boots and shoes. Aino had always looked for Len’s shoes when she wanted to know where he was. There was a pair of clean Nikes, for work. Dirty sneakers, for running on the trail. And in winter, ski boots. One boot sat beneath a chair pulled out from under the kitchen table. How was it that she didn’t hear him?

Aino hovered in the doorway, taking a hard look at her husband’s boot where it lay under a chair at the kitchen table. A dried gray puddle ringed the floor under it like an unruly shadow. She picked it up. The outer shell was nylon and hard plastic. The inside was still damp. It was stiff, barely creased and worn into the new season. Len bought a pair every winter, always the best. He was a man who could live without the slightest pretense, shunning all extravagances. But when it came to equipment, no expense was spared. Not if it meant having an edge.
Sitting in the chair that Len must have pulled out when he’d stumbled into the kitchen, Aino tried to picture him walking in, sitting where she sat. It seemed like such a rational thing to do, removing his one boot. The doctor had said the delirium that caused him to strip down was common in cases of hypothermia. She imagined him stumbling through the house on frost-hardened soles, seeking warmth. When she pictured this, it was in slow motion, his movements like her memory of him, that day he’d pulled her from Lake Superior, when she’d heard his voice before she saw him coming, the sound bending and mixing with the rush of water, the cold pulsing in her ears. Why, if he had the sense to sit down and remove his boot, why hadn’t he come to her?

Looking around, Aino decided that once the kitchen was under control, she would be able to handle the bigger things, the harder things. She washed the dishes and mopped the floor, noticing for the first time a place where the thick sheet of linoleum curled loose at its edge. The scent of Pine-Sol cleared her head. As she pushed the mop across the floor, she thought of the familiar, rhythmic creaks and shifts of her grandmother’s loom. She thought: this is what we were born to do. When things get hard, we work.

When she was finished, Aino went to the basement and poured the last of the kitchen floor’s residue into a cement laundry tub. Dirt and sand circled the drain; she pushed the last of it down with her fingers and ran cold water to rinse the tub clean. The rough cement scraped the pads of her fingers. The rawness of her flesh felt good to her: red with cold and a chemical clean. This wasn’t her fault.

The phone rang, and Aino ran upstairs to take the call she knew would be her daughter. Minna was at the hospital. Her car had been in the shop when Aino called to tell
her about Len. Aino had offered to pay for a ticket on the Greyhound, but Minna said she’d get there on her own. So independent, like her father. And too proud.

“Where are you?”

“I’ve been there two days straight. They sent me home.”

“Well, are you coming back?”

“Of course. What do you think?”

Aino hung up and puffed out her cheeks, releasing a slow breath. She took the long way around to her weaving room. Passing a couch and coffee table seemed easier to manage than cutting through the bedroom to walk past the bathroom she knew she couldn’t avoid forever. As she walked through the living room, she couldn’t help the sweep of her eyes across the weavings that decorated the room. The first tänä Aino had woven drooped on the wall above the couch. A bold, round poppy pattern stretched across it, the flowers unnaturally elongated by a warping error – reading an American pattern as thought it were the same as the Finnish ones she learned. Nails tacked through the top corners had pulled into slits that gaped into holes. Len had hung it. She thought at the time that one day she’d do something to repair it, but she never did. But every time she crossed through the room, she gave it a quick glance, the way some women’s eyes scan mirrors as they pass by them.

Aino leaned her shoulder into the swollen, poorly-hung door to her weaving room. Two unadorned windows looked out on the ring of spruce that marked the boundary of the yard. From where she stood in the doorway, she could see where Len’s ski path ran between them. Clouded sunlight snow-washed the plaster walls a pale white gray. The room looked spare and uninhabited. Looking at the room as she did now, she found it hard to believe she could have been so absorbed by it.
Just a few feet down the hallway was the door to the bathroom. If she could face that down, she could handle anything. Standing in front of the door, Aino eased it open. The bathtub was empty, ringed with a blue stain. A pile of damp rags sat in a tinted puddle under the sink. Grief and exhaustion and hunger curled up from the base of Aino’s belly, rising in a hacking cough that doubled her over and sent her stumbling forward to sit on the ceramic edge of the tub. She took a deep breath. The air smelled like RIT. The bitter taste of dye clung in her mouth. On the tiles, she could see where the powder had condensed in small droplets from the steam-drenched air. Aino rested her forehead in her hands. It wasn’t so bad. Not as bad as she’d thought.

A plastic bucket in front of her like a shield, Aino set to work. Slowly, she ran a sponge along the walls and floor. The water turned pale blue, then a deeper shade. Again, when she looked at it, she felt as though she were descending to the lake’s cold depths. She studied her hands. The fingers were blued, unrecognizable. They seemed useless. As she worked, Aino tried to keep herself from imagining the scene she’d been oblivious to: the falling splash of Len’s body, the heart-stopping silence when the water stilled. She was sore from kneeling on hard tiles. Her hands were even more raw than before. Resting, she leaned back to sit on her feet, hands on her thighs. On her water-wrinkled fingers, the creases of her skin were etched like scales and soaked deep with dye.

The doctor told her that the shock of cold blood stirred from frozen limbs had been what stopped Len’s breath. His heart quivered into fibrillation. Aino wondered how long he’d been there when she found him. An image flashed in her mind: his face, turned toward hers, caught in an open-mouthed search that she could feel in the memory of her own lungs.
Gathering the pile of dyed rags, Aino dumped it into the pail and wiped the puddle from the floor. They left a blue stain like fingered lakes on the tiles.

“Mom?” Minna’s voice echoed through the empty room. Aino carried the bucket to the kitchen, where her daughter stood, bent to unlace her boots. In her hurry, the pail bumped against her leg, sloshing blue water on the rug and spattering Minna’s jeans. Minna brushed at her leg without complaint. Aino rested a hand on her daughter’s shoulder, and pulled her into a hug as she stood.

“Have you slept?” Minna asked. Aino said no. Minna said she hadn’t, either.

“Coffee?” Aino offered. Her daughter declined. Aino asked about the weather, trying to hold herself in the stasis of something close to normal life. They sat at the kitchen table, almost facing each other.

“How long can you stay?” Aino asked. Minna hedged for a moment before saying only one night. Aino said she understood, but chances were that Minna wouldn’t even be there to see Len wake up.

“How’s he doing?” Aino said.

“Better, I guess,” Minna said, and recited everything Aino had already heard for two days, culminating in the same non-answer: time will tell.

“You sure you can’t stay another day?” Aino asked.

Minna crossed one leg over the other, foot bobbing. “I have a lot to do.”

“That’s fine,” Aino said, but even she could hear the insincerity in her voice. She tried again, “Your dad would appreciate it if you stuck around at least until he woke up.”

Minna muttered something. Aino asked her to repeat herself.
"Nothing," she said. Then, after a pause, she added, "I guess it’s lucky the paramedics got here when they did."

Aino shot a glance toward her daughter, who averted her eyes and chewed her lips. She rubbed a thumb over the blue-etched creases on her forefinger. She could feel the blame that her daughter was biting back. Rising to pick up the stained water, Aino said, "I was on my way downstairs." Minna turned to look at her, eyebrows flashing.

"I don’t need that look," she warned her daughter.

"What look?" One side of Minna’s face scrunched up.

"There’s no one to blame for what happened," Aino said.

"I’m not blaming anyone." Minna’s arms were folded tight across her chest. Aino held the bucket out from her body as she descended the stairs, careful not to spill. In the basement, she set the pail on the floor and ran clean water over her hands with a hose in the laundry basin, rubbing them with soap, then with Tide. She poured bleach into her open palm and wiped it over her skin. It was slippery and stung as it seeped into cracks that had just begun to bleed. Then she rinsed her hands, resting her elbows on the edge of the cement tub. They looked no different. She’d done nothing to rescue her husband. He didn’t give her the chance. Aino kicked the full pail across the cement slab floor. A blue river streamed toward a grated drain.

"I’m going back to the hospital," Minna called down to the basement.

"You just got home." Aino wiped her hands on her jeans and started up the stairs. Minna already had her shoes on and was standing by the door. "You just got home," she repeated, breathless.

Minna held one corner of her lower lip between her teeth and reached for the door.
As her daughter’s Honda rounded the corner onto Fischer Road, Aino watched from the living room window. Alone, she surveyed the walls, her gaze pausing on rag rugs with frayed edges and slipcovers that got their start as tablecloths. Her eyes stopped on the distorted poppies. Tearing it from the wall, she carried it to the weaving room, mangled corners dragging across the floor. With a pair of Fiskars, she snipped the finished edge of its web. Then, row by row, she ran open scissors between strands of weft. Sinking to the floor to finish the job, she ripped every line of weft free until all that remained was a tangled mass of sun-faded yarn, covered with clipped bits of warp scattered like snow. Arms and legs draped in scraps of blue, Aino lay on the floor, dreaming yarn into kelp. In her dreams, her body grew muscled and lithe.
Seven

Len bit his lips to keep tears from sprouting. A scalpel rang against the edge of a steel pan, knocking off chunks of dead skin. The initial relief of tenacious survival had given way to constant, burning pain in his hands and feet. Four weeks had passed since the accident. Shriveled, black skin hardened and came loose. Beneath it, bright pink bloomed around the edges, pushing through. Debridement helped the process along, as doctors cut away what they could of the dead tissue to stave off infection. Len winced as the scalpel made another pass. The dead parts weren’t so bad. But when the knife touched thin, living skin, he felt it through his body like electricity surging to his scalp. Unwilling to become a doped up version of himself, mild and impotent, he’d left his prescriptions unfilled. Instead, pain had the run of him, honing and stiffening his reactions. What remained was the rigid jaw and steady breath of a man trying not to betray his tenderness.

“Judging by the pink in that skin, I’d say it looks like you might make it out of this a whole man,” the doctor smiled. Her teeth were grayish, a shade or two lighter than her hair.

Len glowered at his feet as a nurse re-wrapped them. “When will I be back to normal?”

“Normal is relative,” the doctor said. “Frostbitten tissue won’t ever be the same as tissue that hasn’t suffered winter injury.”

“All right then. When can I start skiing again?”

The doctor tapped a pen against her clipboard. “I can’t make any promises.”
Len slipped his bandaged feet into a pair of moccasins. They were actually slippers with rubber soles and a sheepskin lining. Aino had special ordered them from the Ben Franklin on Main Street after Len’s first headstrong attempt to go out of the house in his Sorels. He was home alone when he tried pulling on the boots. But even if Aino were there, he couldn’t have held back the howl of pain he felt when he jammed his foot inside. The fit would have been fine, even with the bandages, but any pressure on his feet was unbearable. At night, even blankets were too much. The slippers had been a difficult adjustment. Oversized, they flopped around when he walked. But what bothered him more was that they were, in his view, dangerously close to being loafers. He didn’t want to be the sort of man who wore loafers.

Aino was in the waiting room, busy with some handwork, when Len shuffled out. What she was making, he didn’t know. She was always making something. Especially lately, her hands were always moving. He’d hoped to get at least near the door before she saw him, but his slippers made too much noise sliding across the carpet, and soon she was right beside him. She walked too close to him since the accident. He could feel the tension in her muscles, waiting to catch him if he slipped, the way she had when Minna took her first steps.

“T’ll pull the car around,” she said, bustling ahead. Len said no, he could walk, but she didn’t listen. He clenched his teeth, watching another car unload an elderly passenger at the front door of the clinic. The driver, a middle-aged woman, rushed around to the sidewalk to pull out a wheelchair from the back seat. Inside the car, an old man watched from the front seat, waiting until she opened the door for him. Len looked away. He hobbled as fast as he could over the salt-stained walk toward the space where Aino would pull up. A searing flash shot up from his feet with each step. When he reached the edge of the curb before Aino, he
felt triumphant. He glanced over at the old man and studied the pale, thin hands on padded armrests. The woman pushed him to the entrance, her fleshy bottom rolling as she walked. An automatic door slid open. Len’s gaze ran the fifteen feet he’d covered to get where he was. He took another look at the curb in front of him and folded his arms, slipping bandaged hands under the open flaps of a jacket he didn’t have the dexterity to zip. Aino had helped him into it before they left home, and even though he’d sweated through the debridement, he hadn’t removed it.

An SUV pulled around the corner and parked at the curb, right where Len stood, leaving half a foot between it and the car in front. Len eyed the driver, a man about his age, maybe a little older. He gauged the space – just enough to slide through, for a person whose feet worked normally. Not for him. When the man hopped out, Len gave him a fierce stare. The guy greeted him as he sidled between the two cars. “Excuse me,” he said, gesturing a flat, open hand like a hatchet toward the space he wanted to pass through. Len didn’t move.

“Hey, man, you mind?”

“This spot’s taken,” Len said, snapping his chin toward the SUV. “You’re the one who needs to move.”

The guy pushed through between the car’s bumper and Len, who swung an elbow out as the man slid by. His hands, he kept hidden within the flaps of his coat.

“The fuck’s wrong with you?” the man said, jumping to the side as Len’s arm came at him. Thrown off by the pull of sudden movement on unstable feet, Len fell to the side, landing hard. Reflex sent his hands out to catch the fall. His eyes rolled back in his head with the impact.
“Jesus!” he heard the man say. When Len opened his eyes, he could see his knees and hands, and beyond that lay his slippers, their soft linings exposed. “Jesus!” the man said again, and Len felt a pair of hands reach under his arms and wrap around his chest, lifting him up.

“What happened?” Aino was there now, helping position Len’s feet in the moccasins as he stood. His mind was blank, white with an aching rush that ran from his hands up through his wrists and slipped around his lungs like a noose.

“I’m fine,” he said, when he was on his feet. “Let go!” He twisted his body to work free of the hands. They belonged to the man who parked the SUV.

“I’m sorry, man. I didn’t know,” the guy said, his hand on Len’s shoulder.

Len stilled. “Let go.”

Aino and the man with the SUV talked while Len made his way across the sidewalk toward the car. “You gotta look out for him,” he heard the guy say when they parted. Len stood by the passenger door, bandaged hands at his sides, and waited for Aino to open it.

Returning on Highway 61, Aino glanced over at Len as they neared Kalevala Bay.

“Maybe you should wait in the car while I run into the studio.”

“I’m not waiting in the car,” Len said, looking out the window.

“I just have drop off these rags. It’ll take five minutes.”

“Then I’ll walk around. I’m not going to wait in the car.”

“And punch some guy for walking down the same sidewalk as you?”

Len held up his bandaged hands. “Does it look like I could punch someone?”

“That guy said you took a swing at him.”
“He was exaggerating. I slipped.” He rested his hands in his lap and patted them together until he felt the sting of skin brushing against gauze.

“Len, what’s your problem?” Aino held the steering wheel in a tight ten-and-two grip. “Why can’t you just accept that you’re going to need some time to heal?”

Len snorted. Heal. The doctor all but said he’d never ski again. What did getting better mean if it still wasn’t going to be good enough? He said, “Just drop me off at the shop. Aric probably needs some help, anyway.”

“Fine,” Aino said. Len thought her tone was too gentle, too hopeful. He wished he could take back the suggestion, just to erase the pity in her voice.

When Aino dropped Len off in front of Amundson’s Ski Shop, he had to stop on the sidewalk to wave her on before she would drive away. Even then, she took off slowly and did a U-turn at the end of the block to make another pass, when she could have just as easily turned down Main to get where she was going. Len stood on the sidewalk while she drove by. He waited until she was around the corner before shuffling the six feet to the door.

Amundson’s was empty, which wasn’t unusual for two o’clock on a Tuesday in February. Len was disappointed to see it, though. He’d hoped to make himself useful. Or at the very least, to see that Aric was struggling to get by without him. The clothing racks were all in order. Skis were neatly sorted in their pegged slots along the wall. A display of the year’s top of the line gear looked as meticulous as when Len had set it up. The store didn’t own any mannequins, so the clothes were suspended with a system of wires to make them appear to be in action, a bodiless skier caught in mid-stride.

“Heeeey,” Aric said, stepping out from his office behind the sales desk. “Lookin’ good! What are you doing out and about?”
“Just checking to make sure you’re not running the place into the ground,” Len tried to make his words sound facetious.

“What, are you kidding? We’re falling apart!” Aric said with a smirk. “Just look at this mess. When are you coming back?”

“Any time,” Len said. Aric laughed. It wasn’t intended as a joke.

“That Len?” said a voice in the office.

Aric said it was, adding to Len, “Wayne’s here. We’re doing a little planning for next year’s Pauleteer. Why don’t you come on back?” His smile slipped. “Or, why don’t we come out here. Hey, Wayne, let’s talk out here for a while.” To Len, he added, “You kind of surprised us. Hate to have a customer walk in and find us sitting back there, yakking away.”

Len hobbled toward the office. “Don’t move out here on my account.”

“It’s no big deal.”

“You hiding something back there?”

“No, I just thought—”

“Yeah.” Len kept walking, head down. Wayne had already wheeled into the doorway by the time he got close.

“No problem. We’ll meet in the office,” Aric declared cheerfully.

Wayne whooped loud beeps like a work truck as he wheeled himself backward. Aric laughed. Len didn’t.

Aric and Wayne sat in expectant silence while Len made his way into the room. “You were talking,” he said as he eased himself into a chair. “Talk.”

Wayne said, “We were just doing some brainstorming. With the golf course going in, we’re going to have to find a new site for the race.”
“Plenty of good trails around,” Len said.

“The problem’s going to be the expense.”

“So up the entry fee.” Len shrugged. Seemed like a no-brainer.

“It’s not that kind of race. I don’t expect amateurs to shell out fifty bucks for a small potatoes competition,” Wayne said.

Len could hear his molars scraping. “It’s a good race.”

“Sure it is, but come on.” Wayne’s tone was affable and light. “It’s not exactly the Birkebeiner. There’s no prize money involved. Just a bunch of hooligans out for a good time, eh?”

“What about Kimball’s?” Aric suggested. He jotted it on a yellow legal pad.

“Pssh! Way too easy,” Len said.

“That might be a plus,” Wayne considered. “More revenue if you get more people out there.”

“And that’s what really matters, isn’t it?” Len said.

“Of course that matters. It’s a fund raiser. Our charitable contributions this year were pathetic,” Aric said.

“It’s still a race.”

“Granite Cove,” Wayne said. Aric wrote it down.

“Jesus, why don’t you just give people skateboards and roll ‘em down a hill.”

“We’re just brainstorming,” Aric said.

“Okay. No offense, Len. But what do you care? You’re not even going to be racing next year.”

Len tensed in his seat. “Who says?”
Wayne’s head cocked. He stared at Len a minute. “Come on.”

“And who are you to say what do I care? What the hell do you care? You can’t even do any of this shit you spend all your time organizing.”

“Guys, guys. You’re getting a little off track here.” Aric held a pencil between his two hands, nervous poised over the desk. Len could see how badly he wanted everyone to pretend that Wayne was fine and Len was unaffected and everything was dandy. He could see it because he wanted it, too.

Wayne lifted himself on his elbows to reposition himself in his seat, shifting his attention toward Len. “It’s okay, Aric. I don’t have a problem talking about this, and I think Len ought to get used to it, too. Len, the reason I ‘do this shit,’ as you say,” he punctuated his words with air quotes he made with his fingers. Len stood up and started for the door. Wayne kept talking, unhurried. Len didn’t move fast enough to stalk out of a room. He continued, “Is because it gives me something positive to focus on. So I can’t race. So I can’t ski. Big deal. What I can do is make it possible for other people to do it, and you know what? I have fun ‘doing this shit.’ At least when you’re not around to piss all over it.” Len kept walking. He didn’t turn around.

“Nice seeing you, Len!” Aric called after him. Then, more quietly, he muttered something to Wayne that Len couldn’t make out. Wayne said loudly, “He’ll get over it. Sooner or later, he’ll have to face that his life is different now.”

Aino had returned and sat waiting in the car, parked out front. He could see her working on whatever it was she’d been working on before. Keeping her hands busy. Before, she would have just come right in to get him. She would have hurried him out the door. He didn’t like it that she was being so overly considerate. It took him a full two minutes to walk
from the counter to the door, just to get past the space occupied by a mid-stride, bodiless skier.
Eight

Time was scarce for Aino. The way Len needed her help anymore, it was almost like having a toddler in the house again. She didn’t like to think of it this way. His humiliation over having to ask for assistance was palpable: in the weight of his limbs when she helped him dress, in the reluctant pause when he studied the TV tray she set up for his food, in the way he turned away from her in the bedroom. As far as her time went, though, it was much the same as when Minna was young. Aino had to steal minutes here and there for weaving. It was March before she finished the tākānā she’d been working on since Christmas and was able to move on to the next.

Len was gone, spending a few hours at work. Aino was thankful that Aric had finally conceded to Len’s insistence that he could make himself useful around the ski shop. They needed the money, but more than that, Len needed to have something to do. And Aino needed some time to herself. For the first time in weeks, she was able to weave. Her rib cage felt tight, corseted with the effort she put into hearing everything around her. When the phone rang, her breath stopped. Aino extracted her legs from the loom’s bench with a sweeping turn that propelled her on a frantic search for the cordless. She was certain something had happened at the shop, that Len had fallen, like he had that day in front of the clinic. There, it occurred on a flat sidewalk. But what if it had been stairs? He was too proud.
It was Karen, which didn’t offer Aino much to calm her nerves. She felt caught, as if the woman on the other end of the line could see her dressed loom, and on it, the rock that would sink below the waves to drown the salmon maiden.

“Next week is the visit from Nova Farben,” Karen began. Her breathless voice made her sound like she was blurtling out a confession. Aino’s brow pursed.

“I hate to bother you with this, especially since... Shit. I would totally do this myself if it weren’t for my sister-in-law calling at the last minute to say she’s going to stay with me that weekend.”

Aino tried to get Karen around to the point, but she hedged a bit more, explaining why she couldn’t do this whatever-it-was herself. “I’m sure it’s no problem,” Aino said, guessing that Karen would need her to cover some of her hours at the Miller Hill Mall craft sale.

“I know I’ve never asked you to keep secrets,” Karen said. Aino felt an unintentional smile creep into the corners of her mouth. Karen had always been so stand-offish. Now, she was confiding in her! “I need you not to tell Sylvie about this.”

“I think I can handle that,” Aino said.

“Nova Farben wants a place to stay.”

Aino pressed a knuckle against her lip. “Is this about the budget? Why aren’t we covering the cost of a motel room?”

“No. God, no,” Karen laughed. “Like I’d ever try to keep something like that from Sylvie. No, I want to live, thanks. Nova Farben doesn’t want a motel room.” From the other end of the line, Aino heard tapping. It was a habit of Karen’s, since she’d quit smoking: holding a pen between two fingers like a cigarette and batting it against whatever surface was
handy. “She has this .... philosophy. I don’t know. Really, I wouldn’t bother you with this except that I’m desperate.”

“What about my parents’ resort?” Aino said, imagining Len’s response to having a stranger in the house.

“She wants to stay with ‘regular people.’”

“Guess that takes care of my parents,” Aino joked, to cover the panicky feeling in her stomach. She tried to imagine how Len would handle having this woman in the house. The smallest outing took a half-hour of preparation, working out the logistics of minimizing the chance of further embarrassment. She’d have to promise him no humiliation.

“You’ve tried everyone?”

“I’m going out on a limb here, Aino. I know you’re kind of on Sylvie’s side of things—”

“We’re on sides?” This came as news to Aino.

“Ha!” Karen laughed. “Kidding aside, I need to be able to trust you.”

Aino flopped down on the couch and fingered a loose thread on its slipcover. All they were talking about was providing a visitor with a place to stay. Aino knew very well why Karen was so nervous, though. Since Len’s accident, she’d had less and less patience with constraints and secrets. It took too much energy. When she saw Len, bandaged and hobbling around, she saw herself. Only she had chosen this. Aino agreed to do it. She’d find a way to handle Len. After she hung up with Karen, she returned to the loom. She studied the shoreline, the rock, the three maids on the opposite shore. She wasn’t alone.
By the time Aino drove down to the ski shop to pick up Len, she had the whole thing worked out. It was exciting, being involved in this small act of resistance. She felt collusive and bold.

A young kid Aino hadn’t seen at the shop before was the only person on the sales floor when she walked in. His “May I help you?” was earnest and punctuated with an awkwardly eager gesture with his hands. Aino smiled and thanked him. “I’m here for Len.” The boy glanced through the office door as Aino approached. He stood back to let her by, adding a little too late, “You can go on in, I guess.”

Len sat behind his desk. The top of it was empty, except for a few files stacked in front of him. His hands were in his lap.

“Aino, long time no see,” Aric said. She hadn’t noticed him, tipped back in an office chair that he’d pulled out from behind his desk to sit closer to a thirteen-inch television in the corner of the room. A hockey game was on, the sound muted.

“Who’s winning?” She asked Len.

Aric answered, “The Wild. Score’s one-oh.”

Len lifted his hands from his lap and rested them on the desk, touching the edge of a folder. The bandages were off now, and all of the dead, blackened skin had been shed. Aino was still shocked by how red they were. Muscle and veins showed through like a newborn’s.

“So Minna’s really going down to Florida?” Aric said.

Aino blinked and stiffened her neck. Len’s gaze shot at Aric and then up to her.

“That’s just talk,” he said.

“And, what talk would that be?”
"Nothing," Len said. Aric wiped a hand down his mouth, pulling his hand forward to wipe the corners of his lips, as if he could take the words away.

When Aino had talked to Minna about spring break, she’d said she was considering a trip, but Aino had talked her into the family’s usual week at the resort. It wouldn’t be a vacation – there would be cleaning to do – but they would be all together for the first time since Len’s accident, when she’d only been able to stay for a couple of days.

“She’s still planning to be with us for spring break, isn’t she?” Aino’s words were measured and spoken through a smile.

“Last I heard.” Len pushed his chair backwards, beginning the slow and gentle rise he had become so well-practiced in doing. “This is all you want me to do?” he asked Aric, referring to the files on the desk.

“It’s spring, buddy. What’d you expect?”

“You’re bringing work home?” Aino said. “So much for starting out slow!” Len’s jaw pulsed. Aric shot a glance in his direction before turning back to the television.

“We decided maybe it’s better if he works from home for a while,” Aric said. Aino looked to Len, who said nothing. He propped his elbows on the desk to stand up, then gingerly nudged the file folders toward the edge, where he could clasp them without pressing his fingers too hard against the metal surface of the desk top.

“I had to park around the corner,” Aino whispered as Len met her in the doorway. “You want me to pull around?” The way he stood and glared at her, Aino felt the indecency of her suggestion. She stepped back to let Len walk past her.

“We’ll have to have you two over for dinner again one of these days,” Aric said.
Len turned, file folders clutched to his chest. "I don’t know," he said. "I might have too much work to do." As he continued on toward the front door, Aino leaned into the office.

"Len told you which week we’ll be gone? Is that going to work out for you?"

Aric gestured Aino into the room. He took his feet off the desk and leaned forward in his chair. The shadowed lines running down his cheeks darkened. "Aino, I told Len not to come back." Holding his palms forward in a gesture that was simultaneously conciliatory and defensive, he said, "I’m not saying it’s forever. And I’m letting him do some things at home, as a favor. He’s a friend, but I can’t have him chasing off customers."

"Chasing them off? What, because he moves a little slower? Jesus, Aric. How selfish can you be?"

"Yesterday, he refused to sell a pair of ski boots to a guy because he said he was only buying them out of pity. Today, he swore at a woman. We don’t exactly have customers knocking down our door. I can’t afford to offend the ones we have." He leaned back.

Aino’s arms were folded so tight across her chest that her ribs constricted her breath. She sighed through her nose. "He just needs more time to accept the way things are now. I really think he’s almost there."

As she left, Aric said, "I hope you’re right."

Every year in April, Aino and Len took a week off from everything to go out to her parents’ resort to help with spring cleaning. In exchange, they were given a cabin for a week in August. Aino actually preferred the scrubbing and disinfection to the week of doing nothing; it was more refreshing, in that soul-cleansing way that sweating in a sauna left her feeling cleaner than a shower ever could. The weather was cold, still patched with snow, but
spring’s chill felt balmy after the long winter. Forty degrees was reason enough for wearing shorts, even if it meant purpled legs and gooseflesh.

This year’s cleaning was something Aino looked forward to more than usual: its ritualized normalcy, scraping away all that had come to pass over winter with the sweep of a sponge clearing dust and snow-ash from corners. Cold cleaning reached a place inside her where scourged hands felt virtuous, and even better than that, because it was something everyone worked toward together, and at the end of the day they would come together in shared exhaustion to see what they had accomplished. Then, afterward, to sweat that grime from their own bodies, sealing their pores tight with a leap into lake water that wasn’t quite free of winter’s last slush.

Len drove, hands tender but adjusting to their new sensitivity. He’d mastered a shifting technique where he hit the lever with the meaty edge of his fist and then hollowed out his palm in a strangely graceful roll, opening his fingers out like Minna used to do to show that she was done eating, before she knew to words to say so. This year, Minna had said she’d meet them at the lodge after driving home a school friend whose family lived on the Iron Range. This could be the last year we do this as a family, Aino thought. As it was, she’d had to work hard to convince her daughter to choose this over a trip. Minna had no money for vacations, but now that she had friends who did, she wanted what they had. That was the danger in moving away: you learn to be dissatisfied with what you had once felt was enough. This week might be her last chance to find a way to make Minna see that.

When Len and Aino arrived, Chuck met them at the truck to help carry their luggage into the lodge. Len made a move toward the bags, but then let his arms hang loose at his sides when Chuck beat him there. His eyes followed the arc of his father-in-law’s hands as
they reached into the bed to pull out the suitcase and duffle. Aino held her dad’s pace in check as they walked to the door, holding back to keep Len from feeling slow in his shuffling progress.

Once they were in the room, Aino unzipped her own bag and then Len’s and left them open on the dresser. She had as hard a time as he did with his need to ask for help. It was easier to do it before he asked. The doing wasn’t really the problem. It was the asking. Each request showed evidence of Len’s erosion in his face, like glacial-tilled soil blowing away with small breezes and light rain, leaving behind a smoother, harder surface. Seeing him wince at the worst of his physical pain was nothing compared to what he went through each time she opened a jar or reached around his waist to twist the doorknob for him.

Len came out of the bathroom with his pants unzipped. Aino didn’t look into his face as she pulled the zipper closed. He’d left his elastic waist pants at home, choosing this hit to his pride over the injury of having his in-laws see him as anything less than what he was. With Chuck, it was never a problem. Chuck judged Len as a man would: he worked hard, played hard, and held his end of the load. With Marja-Liisa, twenty years had only confirmed her initial suspicion that Len’s ambition was limited to his sport. To her, that just wasn’t enough.

Aino had been a little surprised when Len said he would go along, although she wasn’t sure how he’d get along at home without her. Now he was insisting, apparently, on pretending that all was right with his world. After Aino zipped and buttoned his jeans, she sat on the bed, facing him, and asked the question she’d rather have left unsaid. “Now what?”

“We work,” Len said. “Isn’t that why we’re here?”
“What are you going to do?” She had to breathe slowly, rounding her chest to get the
words out without letting her reservations slip through a crack in her voice. She held her face
still.

Len’s jaw jumped and rolled with an audible grind of his teeth. He said, “I don’t
know.”

Aino listened for anger, despair, anything beyond the dull, flat sound that hung in the
air. She tasted the morning’s coffee in the back of her throat. “I think we should have a plan.
You can’t just go out there and pick up an axe and see how it goes. What if you get hurt?”

“Or worse, what if I embarrass you and prove myself even more unworthy, right?”

“Len.” Aino conjured the voice that meant enough to her daughter. “This was a
mistake.”

“How about if you just trust me to do something right.” He turned as he said this,
shuffling toward the door in his moccasins, oversized to accommodate his new sensitivity.
He trudged as if through snow, determined and hunched into an imagined wind.

Marja-Liisa was congenial and businesslike. When they came for other years’ spring
cleanings, she was prepared in advance, with checklists attached to clipboards, complete with
a space for initials as each task was finished. There was one clipboard for each location: one
for the boathouse, one for each cabin, the sauna, the beach, and the lodge itself. Usually, she
would distribute the clipboards, handing one to each person, thus beginning the course of
their responsibilities. This time, she’d laid out the boards in a neat line on the parson’s table
in the lobby. Without a word, she took one of the lists and held it to her chest. She didn’t
meet anyone’s eyes, but nodded a shallow bow before heading off in the direction of the lake.
Her corduroy pants whisked as she hurried off. Aino took another cabin’s list and stood back
to watch what Len would do. Chuck pulled a clipboard from the table and said, “Durn kid last summer put the Sunfish sails away wet. I’ve been trying to get that mildew off, but wouldn’t you know it, I always end up in a sneezing fit. Allergies.” Chuck scuffed his shoe against the floor. He looked from Aino to Len, then gestured the board toward the lake, offering, “I could use some help.”

Len’s hands, hanging at his sides, fluttered in limp agreement. Aino knew the one thing Len would never pass up was someone else’s need for assistance. She was grateful that her father understood that. But the ruddy blotches creeping into Len’s cheeks made it clear that he saw through his father-in-law’s request. Aino pressed a smile at the two of them, turning fast, before the heat behind her eyes leaked into tears. She had never seen Len look more helpless.

That night, when Aino asked Len to come with her to the sauna, he turned her down, saying he was too tired. Asking was a formality – his skin tolerated only small variances in temperature – and yet it was disquieting to think of going without him. She let it slide, though, and went back to her room to dig clean clothes out of her suitcase. On the way out, she noticed that the light was on in her brother’s old room. Opening the door, she stood for a moment in the doorway with her hand on the switch. She left it on and went inside. It didn’t surprise her that the room was unchanged – she peeked in from time to time – but what unnerved her was that it was so clean. The sheets smelled freshly laundered. No dust sullied the nightstand. She shouldn’t have been surprised; it made sense that the reason the light was on was that her mother had been in there cleaning. Cleaning was what they’d come to do, and no doubt this was one of the rooms her mother had attended to.
Aino stepped into the room. The record player had been wiped clean, as well as the tops of Bryan’s LP’s. Somewhere in the house, probably already in a file drawer, was a clipboard marking off her mother’s fulfillment of these duties. Wash sheets and bedspread: check. Flip mattress: check. Bleach and starch curtains: check. Sweep: check. Damp mop: check. Every fallen hair and skin cell shed by her brother, long since dumped from a dust pan or pail of dirty water. And yet he was here, a boy’s life frozen in time – frozen even well before he’d died, as the ideal son with his life ahead of him – with his posters of Led Zeppelin and of Bobby Orr in a Bruins uniform hanging on the walls. Aino flipped through a milk crate of LP’s: Rush, Supertramp, Kiss. All of these things, he had taken away when he went to college, and brought back when he came home for what turned out to be the last time.

It had happened the winter of Aino’s eighth grade year. Snowmobiling brought in enough guests for her parents to tell Bryan they’d need him to be home over his month-long January break from the university. Winters weren’t yet profitable enough to hire a staff, and the family had needed his help. Wood needed chopping, hauling and stacking for the guests’ fireplaces. The trails needed to be patched and cleared of broken branches, and they were years from buying a mechanical groomer. Aino had been in the room when her parents discussed bringing Bryan home to work. Marja-Liisa said that Bryan should do an internship in the ‘Cities. Chuck insisted that they needed him at the lodge. “He’s only a sophomore. He’s got two more years for internships.” The previous year Chuck had only joked about keeping Bryan home, and Bryan had laughed at the idea. This time, when Chuck called him – he and Marja-Liisa compromised with the agreement to leave it up to Bryan – Aino sat in the room to listen, eager to hear that he would be coming home, even if it was only for a month.
“You will?” Chuck had said, laughing with surprise and pride that he’d won the argument. He stuck his chin out toward his wife and nodded. She turned away. Aino remembered grinning at her fingers spread wide across lined paper marked with math problems. She liked the way the lines of her fingers cut across the wide-ruled paper of her spiral notebook. The math problems were neatly spaced on the page and if she lined her fingers up in just the right way she could make the tips of her fingers point to the answers.

Marja-Liisa’s arms were folded across her ribs. “You made it sound like we’d never manage. What else could he say?” At the time, no one considered that Bryan might have had any other reasons for coming home except his responsibility to the family business. Only later would Aino come to realize that her brother had changed in the year and a half he’d been away. When he started, he was a business major, but later he’d switched to undeclared. There was nothing of a tidy, professional business major in his appearance by then, either. His hair had grown shaggy and he wore smoke-tinted sunglasses, even indoors. Later, Aino understood the reason for his red eyes in the snapshot she’d surprised him with that Christmas. Later, she would wonder whether he’d intended to return to college at all after that January visit.

Aino’s father had been the one who found Bryan. On a Sunday morning colored with gray pre-dawn light, the smell of woodsmoke and coffee, Aino listened as Chuck complained with a wink that he hadn’t heard Bryan come in the night before. “Must have been some girl,” he said, loud enough to reach Bryan’s bedroom with his teasing wake-up call. Bryan was an adult, after all, and Aino saw pride in her father’s face – a pride that would never extend to her own later weekend escapades.
“Where’s Bryan?” Marja-Liisa said. She stood at the kitchen counter stirring pancake batter.

Chuck went to his son’s room to wake him. Returning, he said, “Well I’ll be a son of a gun. He’s already out grooming the trail.”

“No, he isn’t.” Marja-Liisa scraped batter from the sides of a metal bowl before returning the stand-up mixer’s beaters to their place. With one hand on her hip, she turned to Chuck. Aino watched batter drip from the rubber spatula into the bowl. Her mother’s voice was steady. “I would know if he came home.” A sour taste pooled in Aino’s mouth. The dripping batter turned her stomach as her parents argued, their voices growing hard and desperate.

“What do you want me to do? He’s a grown man.”

“Call his friends. Find out where he is.”

“He’s too old for that. If we want him to act like an adult we’ve got to treat him like one.”

Marja-Liisa tossed the spatula into the batter and yanked open a kitchen drawer to pull out a small address book. She ran her fingernail along a line of plastic tabs marked with letters of the alphabet. Aino quietly opened the comics page and pretended to read Peanuts while she listened to her mother’s three quick conversations. No one had seen him since last night.

Bryan’s Arctic Cat had collided with a tree. He’d been thrown, snapping his spine against a poplar, and had landed at the base of a scrubby jack pine, where Chuck found him. When the ambulance came, Marja-Liisa had stood back from Chuck, who held his hand on the edge of the backboard as they hefted Bryan’s body into the ambulance.
“Someone has to stay behind for the guests. I’ll come later,” Marja-Liisa said. Her voice was controlled and flat. She took a step backward as she spoke. Aino followed her through the kitchen door and watched her mother pick up a metal pancake turner. She couldn’t see Marja-Liisa’s face, but the image of her mother’s posture would always haunt her: one hand on her hip, the other raised, with the front of her wrist pressed to her forehead, a spatula gripped tight in her hand. Her spine looked heavy, wilting down into one jutted hip. Smoke rose from the pancakes burning on the griddle.

“I can stay,” Aino said.

Through the open door behind her, she heard her dad yelling for her.

“I will stay.” Marja-Liisa didn’t turn around. Terrified by the strained flatness in her mother’s voice, Aino forgot to close the door as she backed out of the room. She and her dad rode in the cab of the truck following Bryan’s ambulance. Throughout the half-hour drive to the hospital in Virginia, she sat with the heat blowing too hot on her legs.

When Bryan’s grade report came, he had already been dead two weeks. Marja-Liisa refused to look at it after she saw Chuck’s reaction. Sitting across the table from her dad, Aino saw it after he set the paper down, whistling soundlessly at blurry letters typed on thin blue paper. Her mother would never believe that Bryan had become anything less than a slightly mischievous wunderkind. They’d done their best. They’d moved him up here, after all. They’d taken him away from those boys he was hanging around with back in the suburbs. But even then, Aino understood that there must have been some reason for Bryan’s quitting the college hockey team the previous fall than “focusing on his grades,” as he’d told his parents. When he’d told Marja-Liisa this over the phone, she’d made a *tsk* noise into the
receiver. "What a shame," she'd said, but Aino saw a proud smile on her mother's face when she reported that news to Chuck, praising Bryan for making such difficult sacrifices.

Marja-Liisa and Chuck never discussed their choice with Aino. They went through all the official channels, discussing it with the doctor and signing the release form. When it was time, they told her. Marja-Liisa stood apart from her husband and daughter. With the weight of her father's hands on her shoulders, Aino had sat and watched her brother die. On the opposite side of the bed, the last vestige of warmth drained from Marja-Liisa's slack face. In the absence of Bryan's mechanical breath, the room lost its rhythm.

Aino sat on the edge of Bryan's bed and wondered what could be keeping Minna. She was supposed to be at the resort by dinner time. She took one last look around the room. This was what her mother had of her son: a room to clean twice a year, a checklist of duties for a boy who would never sleep here again. Chuck knocked on the door and told her she had a phone call. It was a welcome escape.

When she went out to the sauna, she found her mother's clothes in the dressing room. From inside, she could hear water hitting the kiuas. "Kukka tulee?" Marja-Liisa said.

"It's just me," Aino said through the door. "I'll come back."

"Pah! You think I've never seen your body?"

Aino stayed and began to undress. Taking a sauna with her mother was something she hadn't done since she was a little girl, when she would sit on the lower bench, catching eyefuls of her mother's roundness and later studying her own stick-straight body in the mirror, wishing for the curving out of her thighs and breasts. As she took off her clothes in the cold, spare dressing room, she heard the hiss of löylöä on the rocks and caught a glimpse
of herself in the mirror. It had been a long time since she'd really looked at herself. After a shower, the mirror was fogged and she didn't do much beyond pulling her hair into a ponytail, anyway. The familiarity of the body in the mirror went beyond self-recognition. She turned out a leg to see ribbons of blue curling up from her ankles. These were the same sturdy legs of her mother: thick muscled, fleshy but strong and unpuckered by cellulite like looser-skinned women. The same profile, breasts large and round and lower than they used to be. The same thick curve on the backs of her arms.

Marja-Liisa sat on the top bench, hair wet and skin dripping. Her head was leaned back against the wall, eyes closed. Her shoulders sank, accepting the rising steam deeply. When Aino came in, Marja-Liisa made no move to cover her body. There was no shame in her nakedness. Aino remembered when Minna had to take swimming in school; she used to wear her suit under her clothes, and Aino once overheard her on the phone instructing another girl in the magic of her male gym teacher's discomfort: he didn't notice if a girl had her period two weeks out of the month. When Aino looked at her mother, she saw the future of her own body. Ankles, wrists, waist growing thick. Hair thinner and fine. Breasts deflating. The story of her body, like a rose path: straight, then curving, and straight again. The body of a woman who bore children. And lost them.

"Minna called," Aino said. She soaked a washcloth in a bucket of water and then wiped it over her face. "She's not going to make it."

"She's got her studies," Marja-Liisa said, unmasked pride in her voice.

Aino had worried enough about Minna going to college, and now here she was calling from Fargo. She and this boy she was supposed to drive home got a wild hair as they
were leaving Minneapolis. Minna was giddy, her words falling out all at once when she called.

Aino spread the wet cloth over her face and let it heat up. “She’s driving out west with some boy named Jason.”

“Miksi?!” The tone of Marja-Liisa’s why implied that there was no acceptable answer to her question.

“Why does she do anything?” Aino snapped.

Marja-Liisa tossed another dipper of water onto the rocks. Steam rose and spread until Aino felt it ache in her lungs, a heavy wetness that felt paradoxically dry, pulling her breath like a drawstring into her throat.

“She’s transferring schools,” Aino said. “She wants to go to Florida.”

Marja-Liisa dipped a washcloth in water and raised her face to the ceiling. With her eyes closed, she squeezed the cloth dry.

The two women bathed with green-smelling soap, rinsing with dippers of water poured over their skin. From the kiuas, Aino heard the whining hiss of sap in a log, the rhythmic tick of heat – slow and fast and slow again. Marja-Liisa rose, carefully stepping from the bench to the floor with her hands planted on the top bench. Aino felt water slipping from her skin and a flurry of fear in her stomach as she watched her mother’s feet reach for the floor, one by one, with the same deliberateness she couldn’t get used to seeing in Len.

Aino rose and followed, walking naked into the wind. The grass was cold and saturated, sucking at her feet as she crossed the twenty steps to the lake, too slowly for the water ahead to feel refreshing when she got there. The trick to jumping into a forty-degree lake from a two-hundred degree sauna is in the speed of movement from hot to cold. A full-
speed tilt from sauna to water, ending with a pounding run on the dock to dive head first into the lake: this makes the cold a skin-puckering rush that leaves every cell feeling alive and full. But Marja-Liisa didn’t move that fast anymore, and Aino held herself behind, as she did with Len, not out of subservience but out of respect.

Marja-Liisa walked stout and determined down the dock. Bending her knees and holding her arms over her head, hands flat, one over the other, she fell into the water in a shallow, heavy dive that Aino was surprised and grateful to see. By the time Aino hit the water in her own dive, goosebumps were forming on her skin. The water that might have been refreshing was now just cold. It cut through her skin and pulled her breath in and out in gasps that didn’t let up even as her feet hit gravel and she walked up onto the shore. She sat, almost in a fall, letting one arm catch her as the gasps changed to hiccups, then sobs. Aino wrapped her arms around her bent legs, rested her forehead on her knees, and wept.

Aino felt her mother’s hand on her shoulder. When she raised her face with a hiccup, trying to recapture that stoicism that she tried so hard to maintain, Marja-Liisa rested a hand on her cheek, then cupped both hands around her daughter’s face. Her fingers were cold and ridged in water-loosened folds.

“Go ahead and cry,” she said. “Sauna is good for that.”

Marja-Liisa kissed her daughter on the hairline before letting go. Then she sat beside her, wrapping strong, full arms around Aino’s shoulders, their two bodies like one, solid and unwavering in the wind.
Nine

Chuck's unspoken commiseration bothered Len. Maybe if he respected his father-in-law, accepting his pity wouldn't be so hard. As the two men sat in stained upholstered chairs in the lodge lounge, Chuck asked no embarrassing questions. He didn't mention Len's pink, puckered fingers or his oversized slippers or his inability to work like before. Instead, he kept the conversation congenially distant. Pro football. College hockey. The threat of fires in the Boundary Waters. “Good thing for the wet spring,” he said. “With that blow-down last summer, all it would take is one idiot and a good wind to set the whole thing into a blaze.” Len's molars rolled against each other in the way his dentist had warned him about. The enamel on his teeth had worn thin in places, scraped and scarred as exposed granite.

“I sure hope they take care of it soon,” Chuck continued. “Prescribed burns. That’s the thing for it. Used to be, nature took care of it, or farmers burned off that undergrowth. Now they let it build up till there’s a whole forest full of tinder and fuel. It’s a bad idea.” He shook his head.

Len agreed with an unconvincing “Mm-hm,” and took a sip of the vodka Chuck had poured for him. His father-in-law's loquacity made it clear that he'd been getting tuned up for the better part of the afternoon. This was Len's third. Usually a beer drinker, he began to feel unusually lightheaded and warm as the night wore on. His thoughts loosened, slipping out of the looping tape of what he hadn't been able to do today, yesterday, the day before. The doctor had told him he should acknowledge the progress he was making. “No
comparisons,” she’d warned him. “No comparisons,” Len had repeated back to her, which she took as an agreement to follow orders. But he did make comparisons. He measured himself, as he always had, and his criteria hadn’t changed.

Chuck quieted as Marja-Liisa passed by the arched doorway to the lounge. In the week they’d been at the lodge, Len hadn’t once seen the two of them in a room together. Which was nothing new, he suspected, but he just hadn’t sat still long enough to pay much attention before. It was depressing. Chuck twirled a lowball glass, spinning the ice inside. Len watched the cubes, how they moved and yet didn’t move, whirling like that carnival ride he used to like at the county fair, where you stand against a wall in a circular room that spins and spins until the floor drops out and centrifugal force holds you in mid-air, your feet hanging.

Len’s mind was beginning to feel so clear, so focused, as if the Absolut had flushed out all that he didn’t need to think about. He soaked in a pleasant numbness, where Chuck’s tepid small talk was beginning to feel like witty banter. To one side of him, a river rock fireplace stretched from floor to ceiling. On the opposite wall, a moose’s head was mounted. Its glass eyes were hooded and dull with a film of dust. Len had always considered its look one of boredom, but now he saw it as bland acceptance: this is my fate.

Aino hesitated in the doorway before walking into the lounge. “What are you guys doing?” she said.

“Talking,” Chuck said.

“Getting drunk,” Len answered truthfully. Aino’s mouth slipped into a thin line. Then she smiled, a grin she clearly had to work for. “Gossiping?” she asked Chuck without responding to Len’s comment. As she dragged a chair over to join the two of them, she eyed
their glasses and the bottle, knowing as well as anyone else that it would have been fresh when they started drinking. Opened bottles had a tendency to disappear privately. When Len picked up his glass, he felt a stab in his fingertips, but only dimly. Aino and Chuck were talking, but Len didn’t listen. He emptied his glass and set it down. The pain felt distant, like sound muffled by cotton. It had been so long since he’d felt the absence of pain that the feeling was foreign. His mind raced, freed up from the dulling spin of aches and twinges.

He had been dead. Physically, medically dead. Crossed over, kicked the bucket, bought the farm, dead. Len closed his fist and opened it again. Just weeks ago the skin had been shedding, a dead blue-black. His resurrection was the secret he carried inside of himself, the secret everyone knew but didn’t mention, like Chuck’s drinking or Aino’s hidden weavings. Sitting in a wingback chair, beside a wall of stacked rock like a vertical river bed, he felt good.

“I was dead,” Len said, trying the words out. He had to work to get his mouth around the “s” and not to swallow the final “d” – not that he would have admitted to slurring.

“Maybe it’s time to call it a night,” Aino urged. She reached for his glass and carried it over to the bar.

“I feel better than ever,” Len said. “Like your story. And he was better, even better than before.”

“Len, you’re drunk.”

“Nah,” he said. “Me and Chuck, we were having a great time, right? What was that you were telling me about? Forest fires. Chuck was telling me how to prevent forest fires. What you do, you burn up the forest just a little, and then it can’t burn. So, like me, I was dead already, but just a little. So that should mean I don’t have to die anymore.”
“I think you better sleep this off.” Aino stood with her hands on the back of the chair where she’d been sitting.

The pain was gone now, so distant it felt like it belonged to someone else, the man he used to be, the one who died. The one who lost races and couldn’t go a day without seeing the tree where his father had hung himself: to prove that it had happened, to prove that it wouldn’t happen to him. Seedling of a stunted woman. He wanted to be outside. Len stood up, holding out an arm to steady himself. Aino’s face loomed as he shuffled past her. He pushed her out of the way, trying to stride faster than the scraping scuff of lambskin and leather.

“Let him go,” Chuck said behind him. Aino was crying. “Is that what you said about Bryan?” Len didn’t want to care about that now. He felt good. He wanted to feel good some more. The night was clouded and dark. The small lake was churned up in choppy waves.

“What are you going?” Aino had followed him outside and kept her pace behind him, apparently unwilling to catch up. Len stalked down the slope. He stopped in the dead grass ten feet from the lake. The dock hadn’t been put in yet – for that, Chuck would need another man’s help. He thought of getting in the truck and driving. In half an hour he could be at the trailhead. In another, he could hike to the top of the rise, stand on glacier-scoured rock and show that tree again that he was still here. Maybe he would stop and pick up a pack of cigarettes, break one at its roots. But he didn’t have to make the drive. The tree was with him. He carried it inside. He could see it now, its roots digging into granite and clinging like desperate fingers. Those roots were tenacious. They reached deep inside of him.
Len felt the warm weight of Aino’s hand as it curled up through the crook of his elbow. She felt distant, too, like the wind and the returning itch of his fingers and toes. When he looked into her face he saw hope and hopelessness. He wasn’t sure which was worse.

“I wish Minna had come,” she said.

“Why?” Len’s tone was derisive.

Aino scoffed. “Oh, I don’t know, maybe because you wouldn’t be out here getting drunk and feeling sorry for yourself?”

Len pulled his arm free from her grasp. “My god, Aino. I was dead. Do you realize that? Another five minutes, another one minute, I could be six feet under.”

“Len...” Aino’s voice arced with a plea and a warning.

“Where would you have buried me?” he asked lightly. Then he changed his tack.

“No, I don’t want to be buried. I want to be cremated. Scattered in a million pieces, floating around.”

“Stop.” Aino said.

Len eased himself down to sit in the damp, dead grass. “It might not have been so bad, dying. I—”

“Stop it!” Aino stood with her hands pressed to her hairline to cover her face. She was holding back tears.

“I’m just being honest.”

“I can’t listen to this.”

“So go inside.” Len stretched out on his back. Dew soaked through his tee-shirt and jeans. He started to cross his fingers into a basket to lay under his head, but the skin was too
sensitive, so he let his hands drop to his stomach. “I don’t need you taking care of me,” he said.

Aino hugged her arms against the night air. “But I do. I need to be here.”

“Psssh. Go inside.” The clouds seemed to rotate, like a funnel centered over the cool damp of the lawn. Everything seemed so simple, looking at it from this angle, his body laid out on the ground. No pain. No excuses. No not good enoughs. No need to do anything but this. “I mean it,” he said. “Go inside.”

“I can’t,” Aino said, her voice flat and commanding.

“Would you just let me alone for a little while?” Len sat up, preparing to storm off, but standing was harder than he expected. Getting out of a chair, he’d mastered. He knew how to set his feet on the floor with even pressure to distribute the weight across his tender soles.

“Go!” he said. Aino stepped closer to offer a hand. He shouldered away from her. Holding his breath, he pressed the heels of his hands into the ground to push himself up. Feeling was returning to his fingers in sharp pangs as they brushed the cool ground. He sucked in air and pressed his weight into his hands, then swung upright, shifting his weight. The momentum of swaying forward would have been right for flat ground. On a slope, it pulled him downhill. His feet slapped against the earth with two painful strides before he regained his balance. Aino was right there beside him, clutching his arms, ready to catch him if he fell.

“Leave me alone,” he said. Len felt no pity for her, in spite of the trembling chin she was working so hard to keep steady. What did she have to cry about? He was the one in pain. He was the one who’d died. And he was supposed to feel sorry for her because she felt guilty
for letting it happen? When he stood, planted his feet firm on the sloping ground, and turned away from her, Aino finally left. He listened to her footfalls and waited to hear the door slam shut.

The night wind on wet clothes sent a shiver careening down Len’s spine. A mind can be fooled into forgetting its vulnerability. A body remembers. An instinctive ball of fear clung in Len’s intestines. He needed a bathroom, and now. He skittered toward the lodge, holding his legs together and concentrating all his sobering mind’s effort on moving forward, holding in, moving forward, holding in. His slippers scratched against the wood floor with his scuffling steps. His stomach rumbled as another chill spiraled down his back. Len hunched forward, cutting through the office to the rooms behind. Aino was just coming out of the bathroom when he got there. Her eyes were red. She crossed her arms and stood outside the door.

“And I suppose now you expect me to help you.”

Len kicked the door shut and fumbled with the button on his jeans. Outside the door he could hear Aino shuffling her feet, waiting. His thoughts disappeared in a flash of white pain as he forced himself to free the button himself. He bent over, tears hot behind his eyes, and pulled on the zipper. It was caught. His fingers slipped, scraping denim and metal. He cursed.

“Aino,” he said through his teeth. She opened the door. Bent over, Len looked up from under his eyebrows. She made no move toward him, but jutted out her chin, raising her face to look away.

He cursed again, and groaned. He said, “I’m sorry.”
Aino reached for his zipper with both hands. With one sure tug, it came free. She turned without speaking and left him alone.
Ten

When Karen came clean about Nova Farben, she explained that her secrecy went
deeper than just giving a woman a place to stay. Her work sold in high-end galleries in
Chicago. And worse, she was a college professor. Aino’s first question had been “How can
we afford her?” Karen only said she made a deal. Her next was, “Shit. Sylvie.” Which wasn’t
quite the question as she’d intended it to be, but it got her point across, because Karen
understood. Aino felt the weight of her involvement in this small conspiracy: It was nothing
short of a coup. As much as she called it a cooperative, it was Sylvie’s cooperative. She’d
been president since – what? – 1942.

Nova Farben wasn’t what Aino expected. She arrived on a Saturday evening, wearing
hiking boots freshly coated in mud from a state park along the way. Aino tried to hide her
surprise as Nova, bent over on the front step to untie her boots, told her about her hike. She’d
expected someone like one particularly memorable, nasty woman at a craft fair, who wore
teal-framed glasses and had angular hair. “How quaint,” she’d said of one of Eila’s doilies,
hung between two clawlike fingernails and then dropped in a heap on the table. Aino had
stared her down at the time, but after the woman walked away, she’d wanted to get up and
leave, too. She’d felt shabby and poor, and – for the first time – uncomfortable in her faded
jeans. Nova Farben was robust and fresh-faced, with the easy smile of someone who’s spent
a day outdoors. And, Aino was even more surprised to notice, she was young.
Nova smiled at Aino’s welcome and apologized for her bare feet as she left her mud-caked socks on the step. Aino waved off her politeness. “We’re not McDonald’s,” she said, instantly regretting that McDonald’s sounded fancy in comparison with her own home. That hick feeling was rising again.

“Make yourself at home,” Aino said, picking up Nova’s bag and leading her to the stairs. “You’ll be staying in my daughter’s room. Don’t worry — you don’t have to share. She doesn’t live here anymore.”

“Oh, does she live with her father?” Nova Farben asked.

“She’s in college,” Aino explained. Then, catching the pale surprise on her guest’s face, she said, “We married young.” Hick.

“Still married?” she said. Aino said yes, she was. She thought, In sickness and in health, a phrase she repeated to herself often, these past months.

“Don’t tell me your husband’s still at work, so late on a Saturday!”

“No, he’s napping in the other room. Late night last night,” she covered. Len had only agreed to this visit when she’d explained that they could manage it so that she wouldn’t see him. He didn’t want anyone meeting him this way, he said. Get used to it, she wanted to say. According to Len, his condition was temporary. He would be back in training by midsummer. What she’d heard from the doctor was apparently not what Len heard.

Aino started coffee while Nova settled in. She thought of checking in on Len, who was watching the bedroom television with the sound off, waiting for Aric to pick him up to watch the hockey game over at his place. But Nova’s footsteps creaked the wood stairs from the attic. When she came into the kitchen, she’d changed into jeans and wool socks.

“Did you want a shower or anything?”
Nova declined, stretching her arms overhead.

Aino studied the mugs in her cupboard for a full minute, unsure whether to choose the everyday mismatched coffee cups or to pull out the china she only used at Christmas. The coffee cups were stained and chipped and silly-looking, too ugly to share with company – real company: a stranger, and an artist-college professor, at that. But on the other hand, the china might betray her, revealing just how unusual this visit was. She took another look in the cupboard and closed the door, excusing herself to dig out two cups and saucers from the living room side board. She kicked herself for not being prepared, for not thinking of this sooner and picking up a set from Ben Franklin. What were they, a dollar a piece? But cleaning had taken twice as long as she’d expected – the better part of her day wasted on another vain attempt to scrub and bleach stained porcelain.

When Aino returned to the kitchen, Nova was sitting at the table, having already poured herself a cup of coffee in a mug decorated with a squiggly-lined cartoon cat holding balloons.

“Oh,” she said, surreptitiously setting the china cups on the counter.

“I’m so sorry! Well, that was pretty presumptuous, wasn’t it – me going right into your cupboards like that.”

“Oh geez, no. I said make yourself at home. Can’t complain about it if you do.” Aino felt like she did when she found out that Jeanne had known before she did that Minna was planning to transfer schools. “I’d have to wash them, anyway,” she said, to deflect the issue.

“Please don’t. I meant it when I said don’t go to any trouble.”

Aino poured herself a cup of coffee and leaned against the counter. “Did, um, did Karen tell you what it means to us, your being here?”
Nova Farben blushed, her face caught in a surprised, pouting frown. “I’m flattered, but I’m no big deal, really.” She rolled her eyes, a gesture so different, when it came from someone other than her daughter. “I mean, so I got noticed by a few of the right people. I swear, everyone thinks just because you get a big commission or two, you’re head’s going to explode or something.”

“Well, it’s good to see you’ve got your feet on the ground,” Aino said, relieved by her guest’s humility; Karen had assured her Nova wouldn’t push Sylvie too far. Aino wanted to shake things up a bit, not break the guild apart. It worried her that Karen hadn’t told Nova what not to say around Sylvie, but she didn’t seem the sort to brag.

Aino checked the clock. Aric would be stopping by to pick up Len any minute.

“Ready to go for dinner?” Aino said.

“We’re going out?” Nova sounded disappointed.

“You wouldn’t want to eat what I can make,” Aino lied. She’d told Len that Nova would be out of the house before he had to walk out to Aric’s car.

Pulling out of the driveway, Aino had to back up to let Aric drive around her. She waved to him, relieved at having escaped a situation with Len. Just about everything where Len was involved seemed to end up in a situation, anymore.

“Hockey game tonight,” Aino told Nova, as if that explained everything.

“This place is great,” Nova said as they walked into Watters Café. “You can just tell this is the place the locals hang out. Look at all this stuff.” The walls seemed run-down, with half-exposed brick overdecorated in a maritime theme: photos of ore boats, life rings, cords of rope draped around the room. The owners had recently redone the place, with a look that
Aric had called "authentic" the last time the two couples had come here together. "Authentic what?" Len had replied, "The walls used to be plastered."

Aino shrugged a response to Nova and said nothing, although she agreed with Len's assessment of the place. She chose a table along the east wall, next to a window. Cold seeped in from a leaky seal on the pane.

"See, now this is probably just as good as staying at home," Nova said. Coming from anyone else, her comment would have sounded insulting. Aino kept Nova's intentions in mind.

"Is this eating at home thing part of this, um, philosophy that Karen was telling me about?"

"It's not a religion or anything. For all I know, no one else in the world does it. I guess I'm a little eccentric." This, Nova said with an affectation in her voice and a hard, sharp-tongued "s".

"Hm," Aino replied, letting the topic drop when the waiter appeared to take their orders. Nova ordered a bottle of wine to share and continued.

"All it is, really, is that when I go places, I like to really experience them, you know? It's just not the same from a hotel room. There's no texture there."

"That's a way of looking at it," Aino said. It was getting dark outside. When she peered out at the lake, she saw her own faint image in the glass. Through it and beyond it, white-capped waves. She ruminated on the hotel room thing. "My parents run a resort," she said. "Most people just want everything clean and new-looking. So they can pretend like it's theirs, I suppose, like no one else has slept in the bed or used the shower."
“See, that’s the thing,” Nova said. “People want to travel, but really they just want to stay home. Like my mom, she travels all around the world. Seven months out of the year, she’s gone, but only on cruises. She calls them her own little floating America. It’s gross.”

“So you do the opposite,” Aino said, thinking: this must be the fate of mothers and daughters.

“Exactly.”

The waiter poured them each a glass of Chianti. Nova took a sip and seemed to scrutinize it before swallowing.

“Is it okay?” Aino said.

“You had some, what do you think?”

Aino said she liked it, but that didn’t mean it was good. She had no idea about these things.

“See, when I go somewhere, I want to experience the place and the people who live there. You can’t separate one from the other. People try, like my mom. She says she’d love Mexico, if it weren’t for all those damn Mexicans.”

“It must help to have your connections,” Aino said.

“You’d be surprised how far you can go on the kindness of strangers. Don’t get me wrong; I’m not going off with serial killers or anything. In here,” she patted a closed hand on her belly, “you know who you can trust.” Aino tried to imagine herself asking for help from a stranger. She couldn’t even picture herself asking someone she knew. Accepting a slice of pie on the first offer was a stretch. She imagined what her life would be like now if she had: no pile of moldy blue rags in the basement, no stain in the bathtub, no husband dead and revived but never the same.
“I used to have this list of things I wanted to see. Grand Canyon, Great Wall of China, Buckingham Palace, you know. But now I’d just as soon go to Podunk Nowhere and get a good feel for the people and the land.”

“Have you really been to those places?” Aino asked.

“Sure,” Nova curled her lip, unimpressed. “But I don’t feel like I was really there. I was so focused on how much time I had left before I had to catch a train, or how many pictures I could take. You know what it’s like when you’re on vacation. Half the time you don’t know where you are until you’re back home sifting through eight rolls of film, going ‘Wait a minute! I was in Spain!’”

Aino laughed with Nova. The wine had gone to her head, but also, it was hard not to laugh with her, the way she opened her mouth in a wide grin and looked straight into a person’s eyes. Nova let out a mystified *ha* with such genuine humor that Aino’s fears eased. Even though Nova was talking about a world Aino had never seen, something in her manner made it easy for Aino to forget for minutes at a time that she was talking to someone more important than she was.

“I didn’t start thinking this way until a few years ago,” Nova explained. “I took some students down to the Southwest to study Navajo rugs, and I watched this woman go through the whole process of weaving. This was more than just buying yarn and dressing the loom. I mean, we were up before dawn, giving thanks to the four directions. She showed us how to gather grasses and roots to make dye. We saw the sheep that the wool came from. Her son raised them. I thought, this whole place came together in this one rug.” Nova pursed her lips.

“Like I said, you can’t separate out the people and the land. It’s like warp and weft. You can’t pull one or the other out and expect a weaving to stay together.”
Aino looked out the window, through her reflection to the darkening waves.

"You think I’m crazy, don’t you?" Nova said.

"Not at all," Aino said, and meant it. She could feel the threads pulling loose around her.

Driving home knowing full well that she’d had too much to drink was the first thing Aino did that night that she’d told herself she’d never do. Not much of a drinker, Aino was on the far side of tipsy after two glasses of wine. Then they stopped to pick up another bottle on the way home. She poured herself the last of the second bottle, listening to Nova Farben tell her another story about her travels. The Saarinens didn’t own wine glasses. They owned juice glasses and tumblers. Unlike earlier, though, when she’d fretted over mismatched coffee cups, by now Aino didn’t care. She tipped back the inch of Shiraz in the bottom of her tumbler, leaned back in the rocking chair, and felt completely unbound. As she listened to Nova tell her about her tour of a Tibetan rug factory, Aino studied the wall behind the couch. The nails were still tacked into the wall, and she could see a slight variant in hue – the white, just a little whiter – in the space where distorted poppies had hung. The space was refreshingly empty.

As the night went on, Aino thought of Chuck, the way he used to draw together an assembly of men from the cabins at the resort to play poker. She remembered him as such a different man, those nights: loud and boisterous. Back then, Aino thought her dad was simply outgoing. Later, she’d theorized that he only sought company so that he didn’t have to drink alone. Now, though, she saw something new: there was freedom in the company of strangers.

“You don’t have any secrets, do you?” Aino said.
"Why do you say that?"

"Because you'll say anything. I've known you for three hours and I know that your mother's an alcoholic and you're sleeping with a married man."

"Does that make you uncomfortable?" Nova said. She laughed. "God, now I sound like my shrink."

"See, there you go again." Aino's tone was more incredulous than accusing. "There are people I've known my whole life who know half as much about me as I already know about you." The long rug that covered the rocker flapped against the chair's spindles as she tottered forward and back, forward and back. "Can I show you something?" she said. Her heart raced.


"You have to promise not to tell anyone, especially not anyone you meet here. And for God's sake, not Sylvie. I'd never hear the end of it."

"Who's Sylvie, and why should I - or you, for that matter - give a shit about what she has to say?"

With that, Aino did the second thing that night that she promised she'd never do.
Eleven

Len had told Aric specifically that all he wanted him to do was drive into the yard, park at the end of the sidewalk, and honk. He was to wait. Len told him that. It was bad enough having to be picked up without having someone coming to the door like a prom date. His truck had been on the fritz lately, but he couldn’t bring himself to take it in to a mechanic. Not when it was something he knew how to fix. The timing just needed another tweak. But there Aric was, knocking on the back door, and Len hadn’t even heard him drive up. “Shit,” he said, hitting the power button on the remote with the back of his knuckle. Even with his bandages off, it was easier to do some things as if they were still on. In fact, his skin was so sensitive that he sometimes thought he’d be better off wrapping them up again, to put a little more distance between him and the things he touched.

“No right there!” he shouted as he eased off the bed. Supporting his weight on his elbows, he scooted his butt toward the edge and dropped his legs over the side. The door opened, anyway.

“Hey, man,” Aric said. Len stilled his face to cover the aching brush of sheepskin on raw flesh. His doctor kept harping on how well he was doing. Better than expected was what she called it. In competition, he wanted to be better than expected. Now he just wanted to be well. He wanted to be useful and productive, not shuttled off to save Aino some embarrassment.

“I’ll be right out,” he said.
“No rush,” Aric said. Missing Len’s meaning – namely, wait outside – Aric stood by the kitchen table. Len tried to lift his feet as much as he could, but the moccasins scuffed behind him as he walked. He just couldn’t adjust to having them on his feet.

“Jacket?” Aric grabbed Len’s fleece coat from a hook on the wall and held it open for him, the way he did to let Jeanne slip her arms into her coat sleeves.

“I don’t need it,” Len said.

“Come on, it’s friggin’ cold out,” Aric insisted. Len stood firm. Aric said, “Would you just take it already?” Len accepted the jacket and held it over his hands.

At Aric’s house, Jeanne greeted Len with a tight hug. He stood stiffly holding his arms forward. She said, “I bet you’re excited Minna’s coming home for Easter.” Len told her he was, but really he’d have preferred she didn’t. When they talked on the phone, he always said he was doing well. Better than ever, he’d say. He didn’t know how he was going to pull it off, making her believe that was true.

“I told her you were coming over tonight. She sends her greetings,” Jeanne said over the half-wall partition between the kitchen and TV room. She emptied a bottle of salsa into a bowl and carried it out to the coffee table, setting it next to the tortilla chips she’d already set out.

“You’ve talked to her?” Len said.

Tossing a don’t-be-silly wave in Len’s direction, Jeanne said, “We talk at least once a week.” Aric came out of the kitchen with his fingers wrapped around the necks of three bottles of Leinenkugel’s.

When Len was offered the closest one, he remembered his hands and said, “Go ahead and set mine on the table. I think I’ll wait till they drop the puck.”
As Len sank into his place on the sofa, his mind wouldn’t let go of the thought of Jeanne and Minna’s weekly conversations. The two teams skated through team introductions and then settled into position for the first face-off. The Canucks took possession. Soon the two teams were ramming each other into the back boards.

“So, what do you two talk about?” Len said.

“Who, us?” Aric asked. “I don’t know, everything.”

“Honey, he means me and Minna.” Jeanne’s smile was warm and forgiving. Len couldn’t see why Aino was so threatened by this woman, as if a child’s love were any more finite than a parent’s and could only be spread so far. “Oh, we talk about school, and clothes and boys.” At this, she winked playfully. Len reached for his beer. There were some things he just didn’t want to think about. He took a quick sip, making a conscious effort not to betray the wince at cold glass against his skin. He wasn’t reassured by her answer. He felt unmasked.

In the first two periods and most of the third, neither team scored. Jeanne and Aric kept a running conversation that Len didn’t really follow, although they made repeated efforts to include him by asking questions and backing up to explain inside jokes. Then, after a Canucks penalty that gave the Wild a five-on-four power play, Minnesota scored with a slapshot from the blue line. Aric was half out of his seat cheering, and even Jeanne, who was raised on watching football and wasn’t very interested in what she called “stick sports,” let out a victory cry. Len tried to get excited about the goal, but even as the clock wound down and the win was made official, he couldn’t work up much enthusiasm. With relief and vindication, Aric raised a toast to the game, saying, “I can’t believe we finally won!” The “we” was a loyalty bred of proximity, which had once been enough for Len to feel included.
in a team’s victories. Now, though, he sat back on a deep-seated couch and watched it as if from the outside.

Aric clapped his hands to his thighs and said, “Ready for that ride home?” Len’s jaw pulsed. Thanking the two of them for their hospitality, he rose from the sofa, reaching for the empty Leinie. For as long as Len had known her, Jeanne had been the kind of hostess who insisted that her guests sit back and relax. He should have expected that she would refuse his attempts to carry his own dirtied dishes to the kitchen. But when she stepped toward him, insisting, “No, no, let me,” he clutched the bottle tight in his fist, despite the ache of the pressure. Jeanne and Aric exchanged a glance, and Len plodded off to set the bottle in the sink.

When he got home, he heard voices in the weaving room. He lay awake in the bedroom until Aino tottered in. She let out a shriek of surprise to find him there, then shushed herself, laughing.

“When did you get here?” she said, crawling onto the bed to snuggle close to him. He pulled back. He’d worn his jeans to Aric and Jeanne’s, and he’d waited for her to help pull them off. At Aric’s, he’d forced himself through the pain, but at home he’d resigned himself to allowing his wife’s help. Aino grinned and kissed him as she lowered the zipper.

“Who won?”

Len told her, turning his face away as she ran her hands down his legs, dropping his pants to the floor. He sat on the edge of the bed. Kneeling, Aino reached inside each leg of his jeans to grasp his ankle as she gently slid the fabric over his foot. Then she ran her hand slowly up his calf, over his knee, along his thigh. She eased him back to lie across the bed, and crawled up beside him. They hadn’t made love since the accident, although Aino had
reached for him more than once. He let her drape a leg over his waist, then right herself over him. His hands moved instinctively toward her thighs, but with the first brush of skin, he shrank back. She asked him what’s wrong, but he just held his hands out to his sides, poised over the sheets, touching nothing.

* * *

“So fancy!” Sylvie said when Nova Farben held up a small tapestry. The weaving was small, only twelve inches by twelve inches, with a design showing two men crossed by a shadow from something outside of the frame. From where Aino sat, the image looked more like a painting than a textile. She was so focused on trying to make out color and texture that she could almost ignore Sylvie’s straight-backed disapproval. Nova was pointing out how she used different weaves to add texture to the different parts of the tapestry: plain tabby for the men’s shirts, and long, overlying strands of Soumak in the clouds behind them.

“The real trick here is in the color,” she said, walking along the front row of chairs. Sylvie didn’t sit back as she passed. Nor did she lean forward to get a better view. Aino wanted to pull the tapestry close, run her hand over its surface to feel cloud and hair and shadow. But with Sylvie beside her, she simply looked. Nova held it closer to her. “What I did with the color was to wrap six or eight or twelve strands together before I wove it in. Look how rich that is.” From the far side of the room, Loretta Du Bois let out of a gushy exclamation.

The night before, when Aino showed Nova the tākānās, the tapestry weaver had tried to explain to her this very technique. They were too drunk to feel motivated enough to go out
to Nova’s car to look for an example, though. This was after Aino had pulled down all the hangers and laid them out on the living room floor. Nova’s first reaction, before she’d started in on her impromptu instruction, was to ask, “Where’s the color?”

“They’re tākānās,” Aino had said. “You make a pattern out of light and dark. There’s no room for anything else.” She’d been so thrown off by Nova’s reaction that she hadn’t asked what she really wanted to: were they good?

Standing closer to her small audience in the weavers’ studio, Nova held the tapestry against her belly to see it as she pointed out the colors in the two faces. “You see how his face is in shadow? I think for this, I used six brown threads, maybe three black, and two of a lighter khaki. For the other face I used all the same colors, but in different proportions.”

“Could I see?” Karen said, reaching for the tapestry. Nova handed it to her. Among weavers, it was understood that seeing was something that happened with more than one’s eyes. Aino felt Sylvie shift her weight. She crossed one leg over the other in one sharp and definitive motion.

“Can you tell us about your inspiration?” Loretta asked, almost speaking over Karen’s, “How did you come to this technique?” The tall woman’s voice was quieter than Loretta’s, and mild, but Aino could hear the boldness behind her words. Each moment Nova’s demonstration went on – already ten minutes over her allotted time – was a direct affront to Sylvie. This, Aino knew from the tension winding tighter and tighter beside her. Sylvie had already said twice that it was time to move on, but Karen and Loretta kept asking questions. And no one else seemed to have a problem with hearing more.

“Well, Helena Hernmarck is one of them. What she can do with light and shadow, I only dream of. And I love what she calls weaving. She calls it konsthanterverk. Isn’t that a
great word? I wish we had a better way to say the same thing in English. It means ‘art handmade,’ like art and craft all wrapped into one.” Konstnärsverk, the word Aino’s grandmother had been unable to translate. Aino thought of the constant, steady movement of Eila Paivatar’s hands. Constant work. It was so easy to misinterpret words you’d known your whole life. “False friends” was what she’d heard these words called, sounds that straddled two languages but didn’t share a common meaning.

While Nova was talking, Aino tried to listen over Sylvie mumbling about imperialist Swedes. Better language, better people, she griped. Unaware of or unconcerned with Sylvie’s dominating presence, Loretta Du Bois probed for more explanation.

“When I was young, my mother used to take me to the Art Institute of Chicago. My very favorite thing was looking at that painting by George Seurat, Sunday on the Island of La Grande Jatte. Are you familiar with it?” Aino kept her face still. Out of the corner of her eye, she could see Sylvie looking from face to face. Karen nodded almost imperceptibly. Loretta’s voice was the only one to be heard.

“Just one?” Nova Farben said. “I’m sure the rest of you have. There are several people lounging on this island on a lazy Sunday. There’s a woman in the foreground – you can only see her profile – and she’s holding an umbrella.” Nova turned and gestured out from her backside. “She’s got this huge bustle, like women used to wear—”


Nova cocked her head. Aino’s neck stiffened. She sat up straight and looked at the floor, listening like a rabbit.

“Well, yeah. But that’s kind of beside the point right now.”
“Is it?” Sylvie said.

“Yes, it is,” Karen answered. Everyone turned to look at her. In the silence, Aino could hear Loretta muttering to the woman beside her, asking, “What is this woman talking about?”

“What I’m getting at is his painting style,” Nova said, with an artificial calm. “He was a pointillist. Instead of mixing colors and painting in broad strokes, he used dots. Anyway…” Nova’s eyes darted between Karen and Sylvie. She seemed taken off guard by Sylvie’s stern, unmoving presence. Aino tried not to look at the woman beside her, for fear of spurring her on. Too late, she wished she’d explained to Nova about Sylvie’s personality. At least then she’d have known what to expect. But then, Aino couldn’t have predicted this little outburst. She knew Sylvie had a problem with anything “fancy.” She knew Sylvie led the guild toward simplicity and usefulness, and that she believed in thinking of the group before oneself. Now Aino wasn’t sure quite what was going on, but she knew it was bigger than what she’d thought.

Nova Farben broke her own still, open-mouthed silence. “I’m not a classist,” she said. “And, frankly, I resent the implication that I am.”

Sylvie huffed. Aino wanted to defend Nova, but she knew she was in over her head when Sylvie started spouting off about art and elitism and pandering to the upper classes. Karen tried to cut in, but Sylvie was going full-forward. Until Nova cut her off, holding one hand up, palm out, in a gesture that was history in the making. Sylvie shut up.

“I’m done here,” Nova Farben said. “If you think you can define my work by your politics, you can just forget it.”
The silencing stretched into uncomfortable rustlings. Karen got up to help Nova gather her weavings. Aino hesitated, held back by Sylvie’s glare. Then she got up and crossed to the table where Nova’s work was scattered. Too late to carry anything, she smiled lamely and thanked Nova for her presentation.

“I’m sorry,” Nova said to the two of them.

“It’s not your fault,” Aino said.

“No, I mean I’m sorry this is what you have to work with.”

Karen helped Nova carry her work out to the car. Aino was on her heels, hoping for a chance to help, and for another opportunity to ask what she hadn’t the night before. Loretta followed, too, asking Nova to pay a visit to her gallery.

“The market here is full of untapped potential,” Loretta said, holding open the heavy metal door to the outside.

“How wonderful for you,” Nova replied as she passed Loretta by.

“If you’re interested…” Loretta began to push, but Nova cut her off, saying she wasn’t.

“You’ve got plenty of artists to work with right here,” she said as she loaded up her car. Aino wasn’t sure if this comment included her, and was about to lay out her question, but when Nova paid compliment to Karen’s work – weavings she showed at art fairs, that Aino had never even heard about – she decided she probably wasn’t. Loretta took notice of Nova’s admiration for Karen’s artistry, and soon Aino was shut out of a three-way conversation. She went back inside to get her coat.

“If you cooperate with the oppressors, you’re one of them,” Sylvie said to her when she walked in. Aino didn’t know how to respond. Was she being admonished? Was this a
comment on Nova Farben? On Loretta? On Karen? She stood by her seat, coat in hand, while Sylvie took the floor. In the turmoil, she’d forgotten they still had a meeting to get through.

“I call this meeting to order,” she said. Aino sat down.

* * *

Because it fell during the lull of an ugly time of year – leafless and muddy and laced with a bone-deep chill – Easter dinner wasn’t postponed by guests at the lodge, like Christmas was. Minna said she had to work that Saturday, so she waited until Sunday morning to make the drive, and promised only to stay one night because she had an evening class the next day that she said she couldn’t miss. Only twenty-four hours, Len thought. He could maintain an image of normalcy for that long. He had to. Minna was the only one left who might believe it, and he needed that belief to survive. It was the only place where the man he’d been was still living.

Chuck and Marja-Liisa arrived with their usual bluster. Aino took their coats, Chuck poured a drink, and Len positioned himself at the dining room table, ready for his daughter’s arrival. Aino had said she was afraid that when Minna moved away, she’d never come back. It was probably true. He knew how it went with his brother: once you’re away, you’re away. Coming back was like re-entering the earth’s gravity: too much friction and a difficult escape. Frankly, he was eager for her to go. Minna would slip away, make a life of her own, and carry his life around with her.

“How’s your truck running?” Chuck said, joining Len at the table.

“Timing’s messed up again,” he said.
Chuck ran his thumbnail up the crease where the leaves of the table met. “Wouldn’t take much to fix that. If you want, I could—”

“That’s all right,” Len said. “I’ve got it under control.”

Minna’s Honda came buzzing and squealing around the corner and into the yard. The sound echoed against the dining room wall. “That doesn’t sound good,” Chuck said. Marja-Liisa bustled to step out and greet her. “What’s this about Florida?” he could hear her saying even before the girl could get to the door.

“ Took you long enough,” Len teased when Minna came in, to divert her attention from his pre-positioned place at the table. “We were just about to start without you.”

“That’s not true,” Aino said. She carried the ham—it was sliced before Minna arrived, on Len’s insistence—and placed it like a centerpiece. Brushing a sweep of hair from her daughter’s face with a quick, hesitant hand, she said, “You’re the guest of honor.”

“Isn’t that sacrilegious or something?” Minna said. “I mean, I know we’re not into the whole Jesus thing and everything, but really.”

“Who says we’re not into the Jesus thing?” Marja-Liisa argued.

“They’re starting already,” Chuck muttered.

Len didn’t mind the bickering, though. It kept everyone’s attention in a three-way volley, with Chuck and Len on the sidelines. When dinner was over, Len waited until the dishes were cleared and Minna was busy at the sink to make his move to the living room. Chuck rose from the table with him, suggesting a look under the hood of his truck. Len waved away the offer, but at the mention of engines, Minna turned from the sink. She said, “I’ve been meaning to tell you. My car is making this noise. Would you guys mind taking a look at it while you’re out there?”
“It sounded like the fan belt when you drove up,” Chuck said. “That’s no big deal.”

Len halted. He intended to sound facetious when he spoke, but the words came out with a bite. “So you wait until you’re driving hundreds of miles to take care of it?” Catching himself, he softened his tone. With his eyes on the table, he said, “You should have had someone look at it before you left.”

“I didn’t have time,” Minna said, her voice an apology.

Aino wiped a towel round and round over a plate that didn’t seem to need any more drying. Her eyes were fixed on Len. When he met her gaze, she looked away.

“Your dad’s got a whole stack of paperwork that Aric wanted him to do,” she said. “You get it taken care of in the Twin Cities and send us the bill.” Minna’s eyes scanned from one parent to the other. She knew something was up.

“A little girl like that going to a mechanic?” Chuck cut in. “They’d rob her blind. It’ll cost you twice, three times what you pay to do it at home.”

“Whatever,” she said. “I’ll just deal with it when I get home.”

Aino tossed the plate into the cupboard with a clatter. Len started into the living room. Marja-Liisa said something under her breath, and Chuck replied, “I will do that. It’s nonsense, sending a girl back on the highway like that. Think what could happen.”

Len kept walking. Behind him, he heard Aino’s harsh whisper. Len’s jaw clenched. He stopped in the doorway and turned around. Why, after all these years, Chuck chose this moment to stand and fight, he couldn’t fathom. Aino had her father locked in the clutch of her whisper. Then Chuck cut her off.
“Grampa, just forget it,” Minna said. “I won’t be able to just bring my car home anymore. I’m an adult now. I get it. You know, time to push the little bird from the nest and all that.”

“Minna…” Aino started. Len could hear the frustration in her voice. She cut herself off.

Chuck shouldered his jacket. “I’ll be outside.”

Marja-Liisa said, “Push the little bird from the nest! This isn’t the way to teach your daughter how to live.”

“I’m not pushing her from the nest!” Aino insisted. “And anyway, who are you to lecture me about pushing?”

Len shuffled back into the dining room, took Chuck’s bottle of Absolut and a glass from the sideboard, and slipped away.
Twelve

“...I’d fix it, but you’re so good at these things. It’s the one on the end, closest to the window,” said a message from Sylvie on Aino’s answering machine. Someone had forgotten to cross the warp on a loom and it needed rethreading. She’d just come in from seeing her daughter off. The car’s fan belt had been replaced and crisis averted. Len had steered clear of Minna the rest of her brief visit, disappearing from the living room to the basement after the dishes were finished. This morning, he didn’t even get up to say goodbye. Minna took it hard, asking if he was angry about the car or if it was just his way of avoiding the fact that she was moving away. Aino told her that Len just had a hard time saying goodbye. As frustrated as she was with her husband’s attitude, Aino felt a small, guilty pleasure in telling her this. She’d always wanted to be the one that Minna turned to.

Len sulked into the kitchen as Aino was pulling on her shoes a second time, heading to the guild’s studio. She hadn’t slept, with Len’s snoring. Tired and on edge to begin with, she was in no mood to muster the kind of methodical patience it took to dress a loom. Being in the guild was coming to mean that, like Sylvie had for so long, she did most of the work while some people didn’t bother learning how to dress a loom properly. Sylvie knew how, but wouldn’t. Karen could, but had quit. Which left Aino. She sighed. It was probably her mistake, anyway. She shrugged her coat back on, told Len she was leaving, and got in her car.
Karen’s Geo was in the lot at the Stone Building when Aino pulled in. She felt nervous walking in, as if this woman she’d considered a friend was waiting in ambush.

Inside, Karen and Eila were gathering up their work. The two were inseparable, since Eila had moved in with her adult daughter after a quick but public divorce. The gossip had spread with a maxim Aino heard but didn’t believe: the wife is always the last to know. Four rugs lay on a fold-out table. Karen turned up their ends to curl them into a single roll. She looked up when Aino closed the door. The three women exchanged brisk greetings.

Aino watched as Karen secured the rolled rugs, tying a strip of fabric at each end.

“You’re taking those?”

“They’re mine,” Karen said.

Aino sat on the bench in front of the misthreaded loom. “That’s it? Just, boom, goodbye?”

“It’s not like this hasn’t been a long time coming,” Karen said. Eila sat in a chair, her fingers slowly spinning thread and needle.

“We’re going to miss you,” Aino said.

“Did Sylvie send you down here? Because if she wants to apologize, she’ll need to do it herself.” Karen stood to her full six-foot height.

“I’m just here to fix the warp on this loom,” Aino said. Her voice came out sounding a little confused, as if her purpose were something new and unfamiliar. Since missing her chance to get Nova’s opinion, she’d been haunted by regret. As she watched Karen pack up her things, she remembered Nova’s advice to Loretta. Aino might have missed out on one person’s opinion, but Karen was right here all along. Aino tried to work up the courage to ask for her help.
“She really didn’t send you to apologize?” Karen shifted her weight, jutting a hip.

Aino had always considered Karen a friend, albeit a fringe acquaintanceship, but now she was beginning to see the invisible line that she was on the wrong side of.

“These sides you were talking about,” Aino began. She fumbled around her words, unsure where to go from there: What are they? How did this happen? “Since when?” was all she could come up with. It came out wrong, like a challenge. Karen leapt at it.

“Like you don’t know you’re Sylvie’s little protégé.”

“Protégé!?”

“Okay, lackey.”

“Then why did you call me about Nova?”

“I thought if you were on our side, Sylvie might let it go.” Karen stacked her rolled bundles under one arm and picked up her bag with the other. “Guess that didn’t work out.”

Eila put away her doilies and smiled a goodbye as they left.

Aino pursed her lips. Teacher’s pet, like she’d been in grade school, always so eager for the approval that she both cultivated and despised. She felt stunted, a child living someone else’s expectations. It was why she’d first fallen in love with weaving. At the loom, she had complete control. Until she gave that up, too. Of all the things she’d lost, though, this was the one thing she could get back. Aino left the mithreaded loom as it was, got in her car, and drove home as fast as she dared on the curving, slipping gravel of Fischer Road. Any hesitation and she might retreat from what she’d committed herself to do. The peace was already broken; silence wasn’t going to help that. But, she thought, there was one thing that might.
Len was on the couch again, watching television. He wants to be left alone, I’ll leave him alone, she thought. She only threw him a glance as she crossed in front of him, but something shiny caught her eye. His hand lay protectively over a throw pillow. Beneath it, she could see the hard shine of a screw-top. She bit her lip and kept walking.

In the weaving room closet, Aino yanked the hangers so hard that the rod fell as she tried to lift the whole mass of them all at once. Hefting them over a shoulder, she carried them out to the living room.

“Finally coming out of the closet?” Len laughed at his own attempt at a joke with a slurring, empty breath. Aino stopped. With her free hand, she reached under the pillow and tossed the bottle in Len’s lap. The bare wall behind the couch reflected new light, flat and shadowless, into the room. Only a second or two passed as Aino stood in front of her husband. The moment of their exposure was brief but irreversible.

Karen’s porch sloped down from a narrow house on a narrow lot, built so close to the houses on either side that Aino was sure that if her arms were just a little longer, she could reach both of them. Things would have been different if she’d lived in a place like this, she thought. There would be no room for keeping secrets. But then, Karen’s art fairs were something Aino had never heard about. Secrets could survive anywhere, it seemed, as long as you let them.

Eila answered the door. “What brings you here?” she said, stepping back to let Aino through the door with the pile of tākānās heaved over her shoulder. From somewhere in the house, Aino heard the thwack of a loom’s beater.
“I want to show you something,” Aino said, heading straight to the living room sofa without being invited.

Eila’s gaze brushed over the weavings. Offering coffee to her guest, she disappeared into the kitchen to prepare it. Stairs creaked, and Karen appeared in the wide doorway.

Aino spread the weavings across the living room floor.

“What are you doing?” Karen said.

Aino huffed, out of breath. “I want you to see these.”

“Why?”

Eila bustled in with a tray of full cups and banana bread.

Aino cleared space on the coffee table, picking up the last weaving she’d set down: the salmon maiden on the rock, sinking. She handed it to Karen. “I want to know what you think.” Aino stepped back. Karen’s brow pursed. “Is it good?” Aino said.

“Good, how?”

“I don’t know, good. Good enough to sell,” she said. Her heart was pounding.

“You’re talking about two different things,” Karen said.

Aino pushed aside the tåkänäs to make room on the couch so they could sit for Eila’s coffee. Balancing a cup against her thigh, her hands shook as Karen continued, “Honestly, Aino, I don’t think I’m the one to tell you either one. Good, you have to decide for yourself. And sellable... well, anything can be sold if you find the right buyer.”

Aino cupped her hand around the mug, as if shielding it. “That sounds like a no.” The words hung in the back of her throat, mingling with bitter coffee and the aftertaste of a chunk of baking soda that hadn’t mixed into the bread. She should have expected this. Don’t go chasing the unattainable, she thought.
Karen said, “It’s not a no. They’re well-crafted. They’re beautiful, really. But this is kind of backward, don’t you think? If selling your work is what you want to do, you start by making things that people want to buy.”

Aino sighed. Isn’t that what she’d been wasting her life doing with those stupid rag rugs? In the silence, Aino’s gaze wandered, as it often did, to Eila’s hands. Without her fingers busy spinning a hook and thread, they looked eerily still, as if time had stopped.

“Time is the warp of life,” Eila said, repeating the adage that Aino had heard so many times.

“I know,” Aino said. “You should weave it well.” She thought that she had. She didn’t fritter her time away. She kept her hands busy, her mind busy, her daughter busy. Pushing a shuttle through a shed isn’t all there is to weaving, though, and she understood that now. There are choices to be made, patterns to draft and make real. With life, you can’t stop the shuttle from moving; whatever you do or don’t do creates something.

Aino looked around at the weavings strewn over the chairs, the couch, the floor. She set down the coffee cup, thanked the two women, and started picking up her scattered weavings. As they saw her off, Karen and Eila were congenial but distant as they’d always been.

The air in the yarn shop felt dry. Aino’s throat stuck. Fifteen years of fearing a person doesn’t disappear with one hasty choice. But, like cutting the warp from a loom, there are some things you can’t undo. She wouldn’t be able to stop Sylvie from hearing about her weavings. What she could do was choose how she would hear. Enough time had passed, letting things happen.
Sylvie beamed and placed her hands on Aino’s cheeks. “Hei! Back from your mother’s?”

Aino pulled away from the greeting and said, in answer to Sylvie’s quick succession of questions, that her mother was fine, the resort was fine, her father was fine, and Len was doing as well as could be expected.

“You’re holding up so strong,” the old weaver said. “You got your grandmother’s *sisu* in you.” When Aino said she really didn’t, Sylvie replied, “Of course you do!” with force, as though asserting it could make it real. Aino had never noticed before how often Sylvie let things slip away and then fought too hard and too late to recapture what never was. She was more like the old weaver than she’d thought.

Sylvie’s eyebrows pursed with concern. “What’s wrong with you?”

Aino brought in her weavings and laid them out on a table used for cutting strips of fabric. A rag cutter that was clamped to the edge of the table barely stirred a bump in the pile of what she had created. It had taken her fifteen years to assemble her namesake’s story. And only a moment to dismantle the myths she had lived in that time.

Sylvie stood with her pelvis forward, her back arched. Her stomach pouched like a deflated ball under the fold of her arms. “You too, then.” She shook her head, defeated. “Go ahead and put them in the next sale.”

“I might,” Aino said. She hadn’t decided yet what to do with them. But that decision would be hers, and she would make it deliberately.

Sylvie flipped through the *täkänäs*, pausing to finger an edge on one, to check the seam on another. When she reached the bottom of the stack, she looked up at Aino. “You’re not finished.”
“Almost,” Aino said. “I’m still working on the salmon maiden.” She studied the weaving under Sylvie’s hand: Aino sinking. When she’d thought of this drowning girl before, she’d always seen her as tragic, living out a cruel fate. The image she’d woven was of a young woman with one hand clinging to a rock disappearing beneath the waves, one hand reaching for the sky. It was all wrong, she realized now. This wasn’t a girl who was a victim of her fate. She chose it. When there seemed to be nothing to do but go along, she chose what she could rather than allowing someone else to determine her life’s course.

“But the story doesn’t end there,” Sylvie said. “What about her mother?”

“What about her mother?”

Sylvie tsk’d. “You missed the whole point. The story isn’t about the girl. It’s about a mother’s regret. At the end, she says, ‘Listen to your daughters.’”

Aino drove home slowly, thinking. When she got there, Len’s moccasins were lying in the entry. His trail running shoes were gone. All afternoon, she walked every loop of the network of paths in the woods behind her house – what was left of them, with bulldozers encroaching deeper into the forest, taking out trees and undergrowth. She crossed over the river and back again. The space his shoes had occupied remained empty all night.

After a restless sleep, Aino woke to the sound of the phone slipping into her dream. It was the sheriff’s office. “You’re going to want to come down here,” said the man on the other end of the line. Groggy from sleep, Aino fumbled to find the place in her brain where his words made sense. He said, “It’s Len. He was found up at the tree this morning.”

A man from the work crew building the golf course had been the one to spot him as the sun rose over the hill. No one had to give Aino the details. She knew what it meant.
When she stopped at the front desk to ask for the sheriff, the receptionist, an older woman with a kind smile, told her he must have been a considerate man. Her lips crooked up, a meager offering.

Afterward, Aino walked the two blocks from the sheriff’s office to see Wayne. He took her through a showroom of caskets. She walked among the aisles with her arms held above her waist, as though the room were filled with cold water. Back in Wayne’s office, Aino signed a form in triplicate and checked to see that her name imprinted down to the last copy.

Flashing an attempt at a quick and feeble grin, Wayne said, “At least you can take comfort in his consideration.” He spoke to the space behind Aino’s head. She wanted to ask if anyone had ever really believed that, but she let it go as she saw the way he adjusted himself in his chair, pushing himself up with his elbows to turn himself away, just a little. His fingers fumble around the edges of the paperwork she’d signed. He was no different from Len, or from herself. He had his own myths to maintain.

It took three tries to get through to Minna, who didn’t return Aino’s call until evening. But even once they were talking, they didn’t connect. “They found him at the tree,” Aino said, thinking this was enough, but her daughter didn’t follow. The last time someone hanged himself, she wasn’t even born. When Aino heard her daughter’s confusion, she finally understood the breadth of the gulf between them. In the silence that followed her explanation, Aino thought for a moment that the call had been cut off. “Minna?” she said.

“I’m still here,” Minna said, and Aino found comfort in hearing her daughter’s voice.

The day after Len died, Aino heard chainsaws whining all morning. In the lulls when the whine subsided to a low idle, she heard each part of the tree falling, echoing from one hill
to the next, wood splintering and ripping. On the table sat last week’s Citizen. Len had renewed the subscription, paid in full. With a front-page story announcing the groundbreaking, there was a picture of the tree. “Good riddance,” the headline read. He’d said nothing when he read it.

When she heard the arrival of her daughter’s car, Aino was at her loom, spinning threads of different colors together as she wove. Close as she was sitting, it looked a mess. She listened for the brush of the door, the quick pace of her daughter’s footsteps. Minna went straight to her bedroom, running up the stairs. Aino heard the heavy creak of bedsprings and a stifled cry. She set the shuttle on the web and stood. Soon, she would climb the stairs. She would sit together with her daughter, and not for the last time. Listening, she would break their silence. Pausing in the doorway, Aino looked back at her loom and saw movement in the web of her design: a salmon maiden swimming, changing even as she stood and watched.