

# Promises of the Sacred Heart

Kirsten Clodfelter | Carve Magazine | Summer 2020

Every Sunday, Anka rises early. I tug at the blanket as she unfolds herself from bed, a cool emptiness rushing to fill the space beside me. Daybreak is still curtain-muted, only a whisper of light edging the seams. I look for the angled silhouette of a bent elbow, the line of her shoulders beneath her wrinkled shirt when she straightens. This is my favorite way to see my wife—moving through her routines when she thinks she's unnoticed. I close my eyes again when I hear the roar of water against the tub.

Anka returns from the shower and stands in front of our tall oak bureau wrapped in a white towel. She lifts herself on tiptoe to reach a jar of lotion and the ribbon of muscle stretching the length of each leg goes taut, a private ballet. She combs her hair, as long as when we first met but streaked now with grey we both call blonde in courtesy, and swiftly braids it. Then she pins it out of the way, each thing in its right place, before slipping into the blue flowered dress she's hung on the back of the closet door for mass.

I know she prefers I go with her. Before he died, my father—the son of Catholic converts who'd fled Żołyńia ahead of the occupation—passed down his mistrust of religion with a zealot's fervor. But the truth is more like this: Most weekends I can't imagine a well of energy deep enough to prepare our four-year-old, Brygid, for the trip; to volunteer us hostage to that wooden plank for two hours of strict homily that always runs over; to attempt staving off our daughter's boredom without giving away my own. So mostly I leave Anka in charge of the praying.

It used to be that when we'd hear of someone claiming to have seen the Virgin Mary in their breakfast toast, my wife would be the one to make a joke. That version of her is more mirage now than memory—some other person who once laughed full-bodied, who would sit around in only a long t-shirt in the mornings for hours and drink cup after cup of black tea, unhurried, who loved to borrow her parents' car and drive us into Kraków to walk through the National Museum or sit on a café patio eating raspberry Pączki in view of the Vistula. And she could say the same of me, I'm sure. There's no point in even thinking of *used to*. No way to unravel the thread back to who we once were.

Since Brygid's diagnosis, Anka has grown more and more superstitious—anything is credible so long as it means the news will be good. After mass today she'll light a candle in the sanctuary and press her palms together in devoted appeal, bowing her head and begging help from every patron saint she can think of, the names as familiar and commonplace to me now as the list of pantry staples she asks me to pick up from Rufin's store: Saint Michael the Archangel and Saint Camillus of sickness. Saint Aldegundis and Saint Pharaïldis of childhood disease. Saint Falconieri of chronic illness. Saint Rita for the healing of wounds. Saint Nicholas, the patron saint of children. Saint Peter for a long life, no matter how much a straw-grasping. And, for that looming day when things grow particularly dire, even Saint Joseph, for Brygid's happy death, for an end without suffering.

When Anka leans over to kiss me goodbye, I run my tongue across the film that's collected overnight on my teeth. "You don't want to touch this mouth."

She lifts her eyebrows and jabs me in the ribs with two fingers. "Don't tell me what I want," she says and then smiles, pleased with herself.

I rest my face against her neck and breathe in her floral perfume—a talisman of gardenia, jasmine. Tokens of the different life we might have lived are stashed all around our crowded apartment, but this is the only one Anka returns to daily, evidence that there is always more to mourn than we are possibly able. For me, a reminder that to rebel against the way grief wholly remakes us does not take an army. My need is sudden and consuming: I want a full day languished in moments of drinking each other up, my touch learning hers over again—the same map but with borders I no longer recognize, entire countries renamed and uncomfortable on my tongue. I want to chart the whole damn atlas. “You’re delicious. Come back to bed.”

She bats me away, but I catch a glitter of coyness in her dark eyes. “I’ll be back in a few hours.” She turns for the door. “Wait for me.”

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A week before our daughter was born, Anka and I finally found the name: Brygid. *Healthy and strong*. Traits our little girl might inherit from her mother. A baby we were told would never come. *A miracle*. Anka’s parents, our neighbors, even the fertility doctor and doula threw around this word with their fingers splayed against the mythic swell of my wife’s belly. We thought we knew better. Fools back then, to believe our sheer desire, our goodness, gave us the power to will a person into being.

Since Brygid’s birth, Anka’s worry has nested in deep creases around her eyes. The rest of her, though, a body anchored by wide hips and solid legs, suggests only power. But it wasn’t this brawn that was handed down to our infant after all. In its place, we gifted two mutant alleles for a lysosomal disorder. A death sentence.

I stay in bed until I hear Brygid’s singsong in echo, first muffled through the shared wall of our rooms, and then as a tinny crackle from the monitor beneath the window. I imagine she’s kicked her comforter and thin sheet into a heap on the floor and is waving her stuffed animals high in the air, unintelligibly voicing each part of a conversation that, even at my most patient, I can never quite unlock. This is how I find her most mornings.

And inside my daughter’s fragile body—a catastrophe. A colicky infant, she was slow to crawl, slow to babble, underweight, often sick. *In her own time*, we convinced each other, her bright chirps a soothing confirmation. *Somebody has to be in that bottom fifth percentile, right?* But a month after her first birthday: a seizure. Then another. Then a team of specialists to teach us just how spectacularly our genes had failed her.

Instead of recycling the cells as they wear out, her organs puff with hoarded lipids, her bones thinning beneath tender skin marked with weekly bouquets of hematoma blooms. And it’s the brain that’s the real problem—the one place the enzyme-replacement therapy can’t reach. Eventually, it will take her from us.

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I pull on an undershirt and jeans and step across the narrow hall to knuckle two short raps against the wooden frame. “I need a helper for breakfast,” I call, and I hear a mad scramble as my daughter rushes to fling open the door. “Be careful!”—the warning always a little harsher than I mean, and so she’s frowning by the time she reaches me.

I work a smile into my voice. "What do you think today, bread and jam or scrambled eggs?"

But her frown only deepens. "Cereal."

"There isn't much cooking to do for cereal."

"You get down a bowl and pour it and then the milk and a spoon to eat it right into your mouth." She points, in case I'm not getting it. "Let's make." The slur of her speech is most noticeable when she's excited, and I have acquired the talent of hearing without always listening, distracted by the effort of detecting those subtle changes, of thinking back to how a certain phrase might have sounded yesterday or last week.

"Cereal it is." I scoop her into my arms and she squeals. "You're easy to feed, Ptaszek." My little bird. As if to name a thing is enough.

I carry her into the sitting room to change her diaper, then lean down and kiss her forehead through the damp strands of her fine blonde hair—shades darker than her mother's and ashen, almost colorless. She feels a little warm but is already squirming out of reach to bounce into the kitchen, energy at full throttle, and I push the dark threat of fever from my mind. If I slept most of the night under an avalanche of blankets, I'd be a sweaty mess when I woke, too.

While Brygid eats, I wash the dishes. The mountain of ringed coffee mugs balanced at precarious angles against last night's dinner plates is a testament that, of the two of us, Anka is clearly better at kitchen chores. To make up for this, every Monday I trudge down four flights of stairs to the community laundry and return a few hours later carrying an oversized basket piled with shirts folded so crisply they rival the posh displays at the Galeria. I can't be great at everything.

I stand at the sink until the tips of my fingers prune unrecognizable—a glimpse of that ghosted self from some other decade during which I might have spent the morning swimming laps at Solne Miasto or drinking cold bottles of Tyskie in a hot tub with Anka in celebration of our tenth wedding anniversary. But Brygid is quick to pull me back. Behind me, she yells at the marshmallows in her bowl like a war captain sinking ships, holding them under the milk with the back of her spoon and then tipping her head skyward and howling out a laugh. She slides the metal easily between her teeth but sometimes lets all the milk dribble back out.

My voice is soft when I remind her, "Swallow your bites, Ptaszek." An increasing struggle.

Her mouth goes slack with seriousness, and she stares at me for an extended moment, her right eye permanently crossed, before she grins and yells, "I eat every last one'a ya f'breakfast!"

I wonder what I've accidentally let her watch on TV and listen as she wheezes a few breaths, waiting for the wet cough to follow. With the dishes scrubbed and stacked in the drying rack, I hold my post and watch—the way her small fingers curl around the slim handle of the spoon; her eyes, a fragile Tweedia that will sometimes hold their focus on my face before her smile can catch up; the dark circles of splashed milk on her purple pajama shirt. I shake my head and force a cough, and the sudden movement of my own body makes the box of the kitchen feel even more stifling. Maybe ten more years. Maybe only one.

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Once we've finished eating, I run a tub. Brygid is the happiest here in the warm square of space I can barely turn around in, the steam a welcome relief from whatever infection is causing this week's struggle to breathe, the buoyancy of the water lending wings to her movement. She is nearly graceful in the bath, only the slightest tremor in her hands as she pours cups of soapy tea until they overflow, one for me and one for a polka-dotted octopus she calls Osiem.

After she's dry and dressed, we work on a farm animal puzzle until Rufin drops by. Brygid and I have been debating the placement of the same upside-down cow's head for several minutes when we hear the knocking reverberate off the apartment walls—loud enough it can only be my brother-in-law. I squeeze my eyes tightly and whisper, "Thank you God," before jumping up to answer.

Rufin is on the way to his store, a mini-market several blocks from our building. After the mine closed and he couldn't find anything else, he finally took a shitty clerk job for maybe a third of what he'd brought home blasting underground seabeds for rock salt. A stop-gap, he'd said. Just something to hold him over. But he made Deputy Manager within a few months, and the owner, frail and going deaf and probably long on borrowed time even then, was smitten enough with Rufin that by the end of the year he'd sold him the whole place for practically nothing.

Anka's brother has always been sort of lucky like that, and when she talks about him her voice gives away equal parts wonder and annoyance. But whatever he's bogarted in charisma, Anka got all the rest—brains and beauty, plus a good sense of humor and a quiet kindness that packs weight as its own type of charm.

Today Rufin has an entire box of chocolate bars for Brygid, and she abandons the scatter of animal parts at the table to bear crawl to her uncle once he's crossed the threshold of the door. He's a big man, sweaty and red-faced so that his every move appears haloed with joviality. *What do you think it's like*, I asked Anka not long after we first met, *to be that fucking happy all the time?*

He nods to me, barely able to get out "good morning" before Brygid has wrapped herself around his knees. He grunts, bending with effort to swallow her in a hug, then holds out the chocolate as hello.

She thanks him with a shriek and waves the box in my direction. "Look, Tata, favorite candy!"

"Lucky you. I thought krówki was your favorite?"

"Every kind is her favorite," Rufin laughs.

"My other favorite," she explains, her face solemn. There is a long pause, but after a moment of struggle, she's finally able to form her mouth around the words. "One and two."

"I see."

"Tata, we can share. Open." She starts to pick at the cellophane, and I think of the disapproving look Anka would give if she were here. She is so good, that woman, she can parent by telepathy from blocks away.

"A lot of sugar this early," I tell her. "Let's have an apple first."

My daughter nods enthusiastically. "Smart," she says. Already, at four, a great flatterer.

I turn for the kitchen. "How's the store?"

"Since yesterday?" But he plays along. "Steady. Always steady." Rufin doesn't need the help, but he's thrown me a shift or two each week since the trade unions finally took a hit last year and started cutting rail tech jobs by the dozens.

"Nothing to complain about," I say, and if I were the kind of man who drank at breakfast I would raise my glass to that—to things being good enough.

Rufin sits at the table with Brygid while I peel and slice her fruit. Almost immediately, he gets sucked into the cow-head trap. Rookie mistake.

I glance over as she kicks her heels against the legs of the chair, and I know I'm supposed to redirect her, that her weak bones are primed for fracturing, that by tonight the backs of her legs will have already marbled with deep purples and reds like the butcher's prime cut—her pale skin a canvas for that watercolor of harm—but I refuse to take away every small thing. It's good for her, I reason, to occasionally allow the forgetting.

"Anka should be back soon from mass," I tell Rufin. "She'll probably want to pick up a few things from the store if you're going."

My daughter brightens in her chair. "Mama!"

"Yes," I nod. "Of course you can go with her."

Rufin cuts our bill in half at the market; he's always been generous in this way—making sure his good fortune became Anka's and mine, too.

It's enough so that with my severance and Anka's job, we get by. On the days I'm at the shop, she brings Brygid with her to the preschool where she's the Assistant Director. It helps, Anka tells me, for her to socialize with the other kids, but I know that this is what wounds my wife the most, to have it put right in her face like that—the life Brygid almost had.

Finally, Brygid rights the picture and slips the wooden piece into place, the cow whole. "Did it!" she yells, her eyes wide with proud surprise, and I find myself desperate, daily, for some way to hold on to this.

When they're finished with the puzzle, Rufin sends Brygid into the sitting room with the rest of her apple slices and half a chocolate bar to watch TV, and she blasts the volume to compensate for the hearing she's started to lose. I never worry anymore about the neighbors.

The nasal cartoon singing from whatever she's settled on makes our silence in the narrow galley even more pointed. I recognize when I've been had, what's coming next. I've already tried every small-talk trick I can think up to dodge the conversation we both know is the reason Rufin has stopped by in the first place.

Finally, he rolls his shoulders as if to show he has nothing to lose and asks, "Have you thought any more about taking her?"

I shrug with mock indifference, but I have everything to lose. "Anka wants to, but it's too expensive."

"Don't worry about the money, Zarek. We'll figure that out." He folds his hands like this is business, like there's something to negotiate.

He's right, of course. *Of course*. But it's easy to say, *Hey, don't worry about the money* when you aren't the one who has to worry about the money. Stacks of envelopes marking the debt it will already take us decades to crawl out from under aren't flooding the mailbox at his place. But actually, it's more than the cost.

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I was nineteen when I left Adamówka for Wieliczka, a city five times as big as where I'd grown up. I was grateful for anywhere the union offered a lead, eager to get someplace where I could try on several different lives and still the possibilities for what came next might feel limitless.

When I wasn't working at the rail yard I'd walk Town Centre for hours, winding through rows of cramped shops that sold chocolates and caramels sprinkled with salt crystals or fruit-scented brine soaps I'd sometimes send back to my mother and sisters. For the first year, I lingered at every postcard wheel, flipping over the same dozen pictures of the mine—the small chapels and intricately carved statues of saints, the haunting black-watered grotto, the great cathedral with its brilliant chandelier made of salt blown smooth as glass.

It started to keep me up at night, the images looping even after I closed my eyes to try and drift off. I couldn't stop thinking about it: sixty meters below where I worked and slept and drank and sweet-talked women I wanted to take to bed, beneath the places where I acted out even the most mundane parts of living on my own—buying a sandwich or going to the gym or making my monthly phone call home—practically an entire second city existed.

The mine was finally relegated solely to tourists, more than 250 kilometers of subterranean space abandoned save for three, and my amazement disappeared in doses. Instead of rock salt exports, the bread and butter of Wieliczka shifted to the mine's status as pomnik historii and its renowned underground treatment center.

Rufin knows how I feel, but by the way he's looking at me—like he's the parent and I'm the child, some dunce to be pitied for not knowing any better—I see that we're going to hash it all out again.

"It seems like a scam," I tell him, holding up my hands in earnest confusion like we're talking about the lottery or a game show, not about my daughter's health, about her fucking *life*, about how many years we can squeeze from her failing body. The facility is state-of-the-art, one of only a few of its kind, not just in Europe, but the entire world. Some type of new age holistic hocus-pocus, but I'm no Philistine. I'll try almost anything if it will make Brygid more comfortable, if it will give her even a bit more time, however superficial or temporary the benefits. But for the cost of only a few nights' stay, it's still a shock that this wouldn't be enough to fix my ptaszek forever, and this is what drives my reluctance.

"Bah, don't be such a kołtun," he says, his voice sharp with a sudden impatience—for him, a rarity.

But I know that this is the place where the deep love for his niece has been channeled. I understand that sometimes snapping at your wife when she asks you to start dinner is an unfortunate consequence of having blinked yourself into the third or tenth or hundredth morning in a row that feels like you only closed your eyes for sleep minutes ago or didn't sleep at all, and so you'll step dazed into the shower and stand there with soap in hand only to stare at the wall like some of life's great mysteries might be uncovered in the axis of tile grout until suddenly you breathe a shadow of awareness back into your physical self and realize you're freezing, that the hot water has been gone for who knows how long and

the cold spray is numbing your skin, but even that can't stop the scythe of rage that pierces your chest, the pain sharp and real enough that when you push palm to sternum you draw back expecting to see blood, though what's really propelling your anguish is that the darkest ugliest anger you are capable of comprehending has been dredged up from the hot center of hell and snaked into your mouth during the eight minutes you actually managed to lay sleeping, bedding down in a tight coil inside of your limbs, the Djabelek himself hijacking your body to make sure there won't be a single moment in which you stop thinking about how unfair and cruel and totally fucked it is, whispering the truth to you like a desperate black-magic prayer: *your daughter is dying, your daughter is dying, your daughter is dying, your daughter is dying.*

I slam my fist down against the countertop and Rufin is half out of his chair, his face animated with 50 Summer 2020 shock, before he processes the noise. He starts to laugh, and I exhale a breath that's more shake than air, needing to be emptied before I'm able to take the next sharp inhale and join him.

"Look, those doctors know what they're doing," he finally says as our laughter falls away. He lowers himself back into the chair and drops his voice, as if people who want his secrets might be lurking behind the furniture. "And even without them, there's something about that place."

"I know, I know, your asthma." I could hold both parts of the argument myself, we've rehearsed it that many times.

It goes like this: Rufin took the mining job at seventeen, straight out of school, and by then the asthma was so bad his doctor thought for certain he wouldn't make it another ten years; he was giving himself breathing treatments almost every night by then. But after that decade came and went, he was still alive. In fact, he was breathing better than ever. By his thirtieth birthday, his pulmonologist said he was cured, that the asthma was completely gone, that he'd never seen anything like it.

"Children outgrow asthma." My refrain.

"Not like this." He shakes his head like it's hard even for him to believe. "Come on, we've read the same studies. As a baby with a mild case, maybe. But no one has asthma like I did as a teenager and then—*poof*—it disappears." He pauses, here's his dramatic finish, as if this one specialist is the authority on every asthma case in the world: "The doctor said it's a miracle." They're happening everywhere, I guess.

I know Anka and plenty of others believe all the mumbo jumbo, too, that Rufin's case is not unique, that some merge of medicine and divine agency is born there underground. "So, which saint do we pray to for that?" I ask, unable to keep the contempt out of my voice, but Rufin is ready with an answer—Saint Barbara, patron of miners, or Saint Kinga, patron of the salt mines. One a martyr, the other a princess, two strong women offering their protection as a gift to the men who once put their lives in danger each day in exchange for earning a living, for putting bread on the table for their families.

But if anything, it's the mine—not an act of God—that gets credit for Rufin's incredible recovery, the healing properties of sodium chlorine seeping up from our planet's core. Still. It's difficult not to be skeptical, no matter how promising it sounds.

The door bangs open and closed with Anka's return, and I'm glad, since I've run out of things to say to her brother. Anka shouts to me from the other room, and I call, "What?" several times, unable to make out anything she's saying over the blaring TV. Finally the cartoons are switched off, and my head floods

with relief at the brief stunning silence. Then the sharpness of Anka's voice again: "Zarek, she's burning up."

In four strides I reach my wife and daughter beyond the wall of the kitchen, and I find Brygid listless on the couch, her fingers sticky with chocolate, her usually yellowed cheeks spotted bright with color. Anka is already on the move, shouting instructions to Rufin, grabbing the bag we keep packed by the door for just this occasion, finding Brygid's jacket thrown across the arm of the loveseat. I stand in place and pivot, trying to think of the next step, of how to help, but Anka is always ahead of me, ticking off a mental checklist she's had prepared for weeks or months, able to accept in a way I cannot that time is never on our side.

Rufin piles us in his car and drives us to the children's hospital in Kraków. Brygid has a seizure on the way, convulsing in Anka's lap. I help my wife turn her on her side, our movements uncoordinated and clumsy in the backseat, my pulse pounding so loud in my ears that I can barely hear Anka's calm instructions. She tilts our daughter's chin forward, whispering soothing affirmations even though Brygid cannot hear her. Our superstitions present everywhere.

At the hospital there are two more seizures, each smaller than the first. After she's intubated and stabilized, we're peppered with an endless list of questions about how she's eating, the decline of her speech or memory, if she's having trouble breathing at home, how often she's needed oxygen, the date of her last ERT infusion, if she's taking her medication, and when, and in what order. Anka is ready for each one, leaving me to fill in with a nod or a grunt of confirmation every few minutes.

After the doctor leaves, the three of us keep watch over Brygid's bed. Anka takes Brygid's limp hand in hers, rubbing the palm with her thumb like you might pet a wary cat. I stand behind my wife, my fingers pressing into her waist as if this is enough to remind her that even though she's the one who carries our family, I'm still here, too, still capable, and if she needs to she can rest awhile—I will hold the weight.

After nearly a half-hour passes like this, I ask Anka if she wants coffee and then sulk to the cafeteria. I think back to those early days, when my young bride tacked a picture of Saint Anne, the mother of the blessed virgin and the patron of fertility, above our bed. I used to have to remind myself to look at Anka's face when we had sex to avoid the saint's sullen disapproving stare, a look that said, *You are never as in control of your body as you think you are.*

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It's late in the evening when we get the verdict: Our daughter is showing early signs of pulmonary disease—a complication from Gaucher. While the doctor delivers the news, I stroke Brygid's hair, my fingers moving between the smooth strands like water, and I wonder how it is that her entire being knows to evoke fragility in the wake of sickness. Even her hair is delicate. *The deck is stacked so heavily against you, sweet Ptaszek,* I think, and my eyes brim. I think of the water of her hair, of our bodies, of my tears, of the many threads connecting us, and still it is not enough. I suck the inside of my cheek between my teeth and bite down hard, not because I'm ashamed to cry but because I don't deserve the release it will bring, because it's the goddamn least I can do—to suffer with her.

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On the drive home the following evening, Anka sits in the front seat, shuffling prescriptions for bronchodilators and corticosteroids as she stares out the window. She looks into the darkness as if the



answers have been strewn along the side of the highway, like if we simply know under which streetlights to look, we'll find everything we've been searching for. Rufin glances up and meets my gaze in the rearview, where I sit in the backseat with Brygid's head in my lap. I give him a short nod, and then I rest my hand on Anka's shoulder, shifting forward gently so I don't disturb our sleeping daughter.

One thing you learn when you're told your child is going to die—not die eventually, long after you've blown back into the Earth as dust, but early, even soon—is that the world is a vast place, and you are nothing more than a tiny, mostly stupid thing in it. Barely significant. And so I am not too big a man anymore that I can't admit when I've made a mistake. There's no fanfare, no warmup. "You're both right." I clear my throat. "We should take her to the treatment center. It might be good for her lungs, help her breathing some." What I don't say—because I cannot bear to hear the words out loud, to speak even a chance of truth into them—is that maybe it will buy us some time.

Anka nods and leans back against the headrest, but from where I'm sitting I can't tell if it's in exhaustion or relief. I look away and lose myself in thinking of what it will be like when we go. In the months after I first arrived in Wieliczka, I read about the mine obsessively, about the public tourist spaces as grand and expansive as a museum or a train station, and I'd turn those gift shop postcards over and over in my hands, trying to piece it together. It's hard to separate this from the rest of the several hundred kilometers that exist underground, too, of rocky tunnels barely wide enough to squeeze through, of a black so dark that when you cut through it with the compact beam of a headlamp, the light swims.

I wonder if we'll descend the fifty flights of wooden steps leading to the mine's visitor level, Brygid in my arms as we jostle against tourists laughing and talking excitedly in Polish and English and German, or if we'll squeeze in the elevator with other patients headed for subterranotherapy at the clinic, silenced by the weight of figuring out whether we're climbing the ladder or falling from its highest rung. Rufin breaks the quiet to tell us that somewhere down in the mine there's a wall where the names of the men and a few women who've died in that beautiful labyrinth are etched. "Rufin," Anka warns, but he can't stop. There's an eager pitch to his voice, a type of spilling. There are hundreds, maybe more, maybe even a thousand, he says, dating back all the way to the thirteenth century when the mine was first built.

"I've never seen such a thing," Anka interjects, but myth or not, I picture it, the names crowded together across centuries, all those men laboring through their last breaths in dank suffocating spaces, thinking of their families, of air and light. I imagine the wives and children at home, hearing the news—this morning your husband or brother or son went to work like every other day, and now you will never see him again. I can't imagine that type of magic as healing—all those names marking the sacrifice like a refrain. But in spite of this warning, tourists still flock by the thousands each year, and now we'll be like them, too, whispering hushed, cautious prayers as we walk by the chiseled faces of the watchful saints carved right into the salt.

The most popular feature of the mine is a gorgeous cathedral dedicated to Saint Kinga. This, too, is made entirely of salt. It sounds like the setting of a grade-school fable, but I've seen the photographs, know that it's buried somewhere beneath the city we live in. There's a mural of The Last Supper reproduced in the walls, a sculpture of the Bethlehem crib, a cascade of bright chandeliers hanging from the ceiling like a landing strip, calling us home to the altar.

Before the clinic, or maybe after, I know that Anka will want us to take Brygid there. It will be busy and crowded with people, everyone wanting to give themselves over to all that beauty. As we exit off the highway, I imagine us standing before Saint Kinga, offering a prayer to her and the others, to every god we can think of, to let it not be Nawie— the harbinger of tragic premature death—but Dogoda who embodies our daughter, the love and gentleness of her spirit carried to us on winds from the west, and then I wonder what would happen if from the high altar we tunneled upward, if we could break through the dirt and cement foundation and arrive in the lobby of our apartment building or in the aisle of Ruffin's store that sells dry goods for baking, as if we'd never left at all.

At the altar, Jesus's body is strung up on the cross, waiting, as I understand it, to unburden us, and behind him Saint Kinga glows in the wall, an ethereal protector. Anka and I will stand next to each other, Brygid in my arms that by then will be tingling with numbness, her tiny frame curled against me, asleep, and Anka and I will nod our heads toward the floor. Anka will rest a hand on her daughter and pray, but I will use my energy to hope that as my ptaszek is sleeping, she has dreamed herself somewhere peaceful and happy, to a place where she is no longer encumbered, a place where there is water enough for weightlessness. We will stand there together with our eyes shut tightly—the three of us fused in delicate harmony—waiting patiently for our miracle.

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