



In the beginning, Drago smelled of dirt and bloom, the odor that would rise if you peeled the earth back at its seams. When he appeared on the doorstep of her father's farmhouse in Croatia on the first anniversary of her mother's death, Klara was sixteen and grateful that the mourning period for her mother had finally ended. At sunrise that very day, for the first time in a year, she had put on the pale green skirt that lit her eyes instead of the black one that highlighted only her grief. But even so, she was still encumbered with the care of five little ones who clung like spiders to her, so that when Drago knocked and she opened the door, she looked more like the three-headed, seven-limbed monster that was fabled to live among the haystacks in the fields than an almost beautiful girl on a farm. The littlest child was wrapped around her neck, fingers clawed deep into the skin, and the eldest crawled up her back like a lizard. The remaining three hung at odd angles—upside-down and sideways—from her arms and legs. Only the littlest one was quiet; the rest cackled and shrieked and giggled.

At the sight of such frenzy, another stranger might have turned to run, but Klara had just baked a rhubarb pie and its scent kept Drago on the stoop. While he watched from the doorway, she pulled the pie from the stove, set it on the sill to cool, and stepped out to meet him, all with five

little ones still dancing on her. The juices from the baked rhubarb ran down her arm, and as she looked at Drago for the first time, Klara licked her fingers clean. Close up, his full, rich odor blended with the scent of pie and filled her nostrils. Though he was dusty and road-worn, he had clear blue eyes, a strong jaw, and muscled shoulders. He carried a leather satchel and one small traveler's bag.

"*Zdravo*," she said. Though many travelers had stood in that very place, this man was surely the most handsome of all. Klara's stomach twisted into a funny knot, and a burning heat spread across her chest.

"Hello," Drago answered. He smiled and looked into her eyes. They were odd, but beautiful—green like the skin of a grape just before picking. Bright and luscious.

"Who are you?" Klara asked.

"Drago Bozic."

"*Gdje ideš?*" she asked, nodding to the traveler's bag.

"To America," he said. "Would you like to come?"

Klara's heart jumped, and although she didn't answer his question directly, she smiled. *Ameriku*. This man was going to *Ameriku*.

After a moment of silence that was thickened with more expectation and hope than she'd ever allowed herself, Klara looked past Drago to the rolling meadows beyond. A few houses were scattered in small clumps between the stoop and the horizon. Otherwise, she could see only apple orchards and fields of wheat and rye. She had lived in this village her entire life and had rarely traveled beyond its borders. Whenever she'd pointed to the road that led away from the village and asked, "Where does this go?" her father had said, "To trouble and back." And her mother had always agreed. Though Klara knew better than to answer back as a child, she'd never believed them. She'd let their answers drift far away and instead turned to her dreams for inspiration. In them, she saw that the world beyond was magnificent.

Klara looked at Drago again. “Would you like to come in?” she asked.

He nodded and stepped into the house.

After settling the children into their beds for a nap, Klara settled Drago at the table. Over a bowl of piping-hot potato soup and a slice of still-warm rhubarb pie, she invited him to rest with her family for a few days. As their home stood at a crossroads between the inland villages and the Adriatic Sea, her mother had often offered the same hospitality to passing travelers. It wasn’t unusual to have a newlywed couple or even a family of four or five spend a few nights in the barn with the cows and horses for company. Once a family of fourteen had rested there for four days: a mother, a father, six children, three aunts, two uncles, and an ancient grandmother who had told Klara stories about traveling by boat. For many nights after, Klara had dreamed of waves.

Shortly after Drago agreed to stay, Klara boiled several buckets of water over the fire and poured a steaming bath for him. She stirred lavender into the water with a wooden paddle and then rubbed a few drops onto her wrists and neck. While she waited outside the door for him to undress, she thought about America. In that moment, she realized that all her life she had been waiting to leave this little village. Ever since she’d been old enough to read the letters that arrived from travelers who had stayed a few days on their farm, she had longed to follow them. She’d carried their letters to the swing under the apple tree or to a quiet corner in the barn and read each one over and over until the pages were worn through and tattered. This one told about the jungle-like forests and ferocious animals. That one told of fashionable cities, fancy shoe stores, silk stockings, and high tea. Though she’d never admitted it out loud, each letter had lured her farther and farther from her home, and the urge to go had been especially acute since her mother’s death.

When Drago was appropriately submerged in the tub, Klara entered the room. The air was thick and foggy with lavender steam that gathered in small droplets on her lips and forehead. Her heart was pounding and her arms and legs felt as if they might give and fold. She looked at Drago's bare chest and smiled shyly. Though she had seen her older brothers naked from time to time, this was something different.

"*Bok*," he said. This time his greeting was informal, almost intimate.

Klara smiled. "Hello," she answered, then she dipped a pitcher into the bath and poured the water slowly over his head.

"I haven't been bathed since I was a boy," he said.

Klara ran her fingers through his hair to push water to the roots. "And I have never bathed anyone but the children and me."

Drago stretched his arms out to let them float on the surface of the water, and Klara soaped them and rubbed them with her hands. The long sinews of muscle in his forearms loosened under her fingers.

She scrubbed his back and then wrapped her arms around him from behind to wash his chest. He made a quiet sound as she rubbed the soap in circles on his stomach, drifting for just a moment below the surface of the water. When she paused, enjoying the feel of his body, he let his head fall back against her chest. They stayed like that for a long minute, and when she finally stood and looked down, Klara saw that a wet spot in the shape of Drago's head was imprinted on her blouse.

Of course, she knew that bathing this man was a strange and premature adventure. If one of her older brothers had come in from the fields, she would have been chased from the room like a child, eternally chastised and bereft of this opportunity. If her father had come in for a cup of hot

coffee, he would have beaten her silly. But despite her desire to venture out on her own and explore the world she had seen in her dreams, Klara knew that her only chance at escape from life in this village was a man. Otherwise, her father would never let her go.

So despite the danger of the encounter, Klara finished her task and left Drago to dry and dress. By the time company arrived, he was spit-shined and pressed, full of charm and stories.



When Klara woke the next morning, a raw wind was blowing through the village. It carried off everything that wasn't tacked down: wheat chaff, fallen leaves, Stjepan Levak's lost cap, a ball of fishing line from the river's edge, corks, school papers, and apple cores. It opened shutters and closed them again. It whipped Mrs. Rakovic's skirt above her head and moved a team of horses from one side of a field to the other. That mighty wind even lifted old Widow Zlata right off the ground as she walked down the path to milk the cows. The story later went that if her mind had been as withered as her body, she might not have thought quickly enough to grab onto a tree limb on her way up and might have traveled all the way to the moon.

Like a lost animal, the wind roared and whistled, and despite the fact that they didn't bring rain for a few days, thick gray clouds gathered overhead. Life was changing; Klara sensed it. God had knocked on her door and offered an answer to her prayers, and although she was surprised to discover he had dropped that answer at her doorstep in the shape of a man, she recognized it immediately. "Appreciate a good thing," she'd heard her mother say whenever one of the children complained. "God never delivers in the way we expect him to." So after washing her face and hands, Klara decided to heed her mother's words, and for

emphasis, sprinkled lavender water in the space between her breasts and pinned her hair back so that long ringlets framed her face.

After breakfast, when Klara's father and older brothers had gone to the fields and the little ones were settled in the corner with blocks and dolls, Drago sat down with Klara in front of the fire. Weather darkened the room, and shadows played as if it were nighttime.

*"Imam poklon za tebe,"* he said.

"A present?" Klara leaned forward. "For me?"

Drago reached into his pocket and pulled out a miniature horse that he had carved from a light, yellowy wood. It was shaped so that its mane and tail stretched far behind, as if the horse were caught in a swift gallop. He handed it to Klara, and immediately she saw that he had talented hands. The details were finely wrought.

"My youngest brother," he told her, "the one all the girls say was most handsome, was sliced in half last year by a piece of farm machinery. I found him in the field at dusk."

Klara glanced from the horse to Drago's face.

"We don't know how it happened," he continued. "He was alone. My mother was so distraught that she made us bury him in two sawed-off coffins—one for his upper half and one for his lower—set side by side in an extra-wide grave."

Klara didn't know what to make of this story. She felt Drago was telling her something important, something that spoke to the deepest part of his soul, but she didn't know what to do with it. She leaned across the table and covered his hands with hers. She had expected them to be rough, but instead found them to be rather soft, with raised scars here and there. Once again, that lovely heat spread across her chest.

The next morning, the wind had subsided a bit, and Klara asked Drago to walk with her through the pear orchard. They held hands under the gnarled, knotted limbs, and

when they paused, Drago gave her another carving. This time, a wolf. It was made from a hard, dark wood, and the jaws and teeth were quite obviously over-pronounced. When she held it, a shiver shot up Klara's spine.

"My oldest brother, Josip, is a son of a bitch," Drago said.

Klara winced when he cursed. *Kurvin sin*. Son of a bitch. She'd heard such language from boys in town who gathered outside the general shop practicing their manhood, and from her father, who was rough and cruel and full of language she would like to forget. To ease the sting, she watched a fish leap from the river. His shiny back split the water.

"He's fleshy, my brother, covered with hair like a boar," Drago continued.

"Where is he now?" Klara asked, as the fish completed its flight and disappeared below the river's skin.

"He and his wife run the family farm. They have four boys and all the profits." As he spoke, Drago's voice grew thick with disdain and envy. His eyes darkened and his jaw clenched. Klara felt her stomach tighten and she wanted to run, but instead she leaned over and kissed him. The kiss was brief, but startling. When she pulled back, Klara covered her mouth with her hand and looked at the ground. Drago smiled. The darkness passed.

That night, the family gathered for dinner. At first, Klara's father was happy to have the stranger among them. He poured whiskey and offered a pipe. It wasn't until he saw Drago place a hand on the small of Klara's back that he realized it would be this man who took his daughter from him. And while his first reaction was anger, he remembered the widow from the next village over who had shown interest in becoming a wife. As long as he had someone to raise his children into farmhands, he was content. So he sat back in his chair, happy to be getting rid of a whiny, hungry mouth, and let fate run its course.

Finally, on the third day of Drago's visit, as a much-needed rainstorm burst overhead, Drago gave Klara an owl the color of dried cherries. "The owl has nothing to do with death as the gypsies would have you believe," he told her. "The owl is watchful and wise."

"It's my favorite," she said, turning it over in her hands. "Tell me about the brother you left out. You mentioned a third. What's his name?"

"Janko," Drago said. He smiled. "He is closest to me in age and friendship. When we were small, he protected me."

Klara relaxed. When Drago spoke of Janko, there was no sign of anger or darkness. He looked light and easy, as he had when she'd first opened the door of her home.

"Two years ago he went to America and settled in a town called Thirsty." Drago spoke slowly and pronounced the foreign names in English deliberately. He had worked hard to memorize each syllable. "Now he works in a mill where they make steel."

"*Čelik*," Klara said. Steel.

"Hhhmm," Drago said. "Janko tells me in letters that the hills in this town are as steep and as lovely as those between your village and Zagreb." He turned in a complete circle, sweeping his arm in an upward arc. After a quick glance at Klara, who continued to study the fine details of the owl's awesome claws, he said, "Many of us," and he thumped his chest just once with a closed fist to indicate his fellow Croatians, "have already crossed and gathered in this town. Janko says there are many jobs."

Drago's lips twitched as he tried not to speak too ardently about America and a job on which Josip had no claim, but even so, Klara felt the urgency in him. His excitement was contagious, and once again, she felt that familiar longing to leave. She wasn't entirely comfortable with that urge, or any of the others she'd been feeling since Drago's arrival, so she was grateful that the owl gave her something to focus on.



The carvings and the stories were small presents. There were no jewels or fine dresses or bottles of perfume. But since the only significant gift Klara had ever received was the gold cross that hung around her neck—a present from her grandmother on the day she was born—Drago’s earnest offerings quickly won whatever small places of her heart she had not already turned over to him on the stoop or in the bath. A few moments later, when he proposed marriage, Klara readily accepted.



They married the following Sunday in the village church and then crossed the ocean by ship. Though from the moment they climbed on board, Klara wanted to stand on the deck and watch the world change, she couldn’t wait to get to their tiny cabin where she could be alone with Drago for the first time. The tension and heat that had begun to build during Drago’s bath had mounted in the ensuing days, so when they’d finally stowed their luggage and retreated into privacy, Klara felt brave enough to peel off her clothes and stand naked in front of him. She didn’t know what she expected, but what followed was even better. Drago smiled, tucked a loose curl behind her ear, and kissed her. They climbed into the berth and let the waves buoy them up and down for many days.

After the long journey at sea, they landed and traveled the new continent by horse and wagon driven by a man with one arm. When their journey was nearly over, they paused under a canopy of maple trees just a few miles from Thirsty. Here they unloaded from the hired man’s wagon, rented a mule and hitch, piled their belongings high in the bed, and continued on. As soon as they were alone, Klara bowed her head and began to cry. She had expected to settle in a lovely place, like home, where gardens and green meadows and flowering orchards stretched as far as she could see.

A place where small villages were cast across the land like beans from a turned bowl. The letters that she'd read from travelers had described many lands just like that, but a mill town was something she hadn't foreseen in her dreams of a magnificent world.

The colors themselves were strange and unfamiliar—blacks, grays, and putrid yellow smeared like rancid butter across the sky. It was as if the entire town were in mourning. The tall stacks of the mills spit smoke so thick she couldn't see to the other side of the river. Along the muddy road, buggies, wagons, horses, cows, children, garbage, and chickens littered the path. As Drago prodded the mule forward, they passed boardinghouses and tenements, saloons and butcher shops. Drunks leaned against posts and slept against shop stoops; a man at the corner played a tambourine and sang while a small boy danced; a few beggars followed the wagon calling for coins; and women Klara knew to be prostitutes leaned their fat breasts on banisters and hollered out to passers-by. As she looked around, Klara thought about her brothers who had warned her against traveling so far from home. Then she remembered something her mother had said many times throughout her life. "We all die many deaths."

Though Drago looked as startled and out of place as Klara, he was determined to go on. "Wipe your tears," he said, then flicked the reins to move the mule. His voice was thick again, and Klara heard the same tension she'd sensed when he'd told her the story of Josip. A small bubble of fear burst in her.

*"Želim ići kući,"* she said.

"You are home, lady. This is your home now. There is no going back."

Klara closed her eyes. She tried to block out the scene and pretend that the one-armed man had delivered them to an exotic land where women were draped in silk and the trees hung heavy with fruit. But even before she could pull

up the flavor of the fruit in her mouth, Drago slapped her hard on the knee with his knuckles. Her eyes flew open, and she pressed her hand against the sting.

“Why did you do that?” she asked. “It hurt.”

“Lady, stop your whining and open your eyes,” he said and gripped her wrist hard. The more she struggled, the tighter he gripped, until it felt as if her bone would snap.

He stopped the mule and stared at her. When she finally quieted, he loosened his grip, knuckle-slapped her again, and said, “Like I said, you are home. No use hiding from it now.”

In the silence that followed, Klara stared into the folds of her skirt, feeling the bruise on her knee blossom into a deep purple peony. Though she’d often watched her father strike her mother and had even nursed her own wounds from his ready hand, she’d intended to leave all that behind. When she realized that she hadn’t, anger swelled in her belly. But when it threatened to surge up and out of her, she swallowed it hard. Instead she listened to the sounds of the mill—rhythmic pounding, screeching, hollering, all of it echoing up and off the hills like thunder.

They climbed the road that wound its way up the steep hills to Thirsty, and when they reached the top, Klara breathed a small sigh of relief. Though it certainly didn’t look anything like home, corn rose on the left and sunflowers stood tall on the right. Yes, all the greens and yellows had been dusted to a dull gray with soot from the mill, but it was something.

Thankfully, too, there was Katherine. Katherine Zupanovic. When Klara and Drago pulled up to their new home—one that Drago’s brother had rented for them—she was sitting on her front porch, right next door, no more than spitting distance away. It was hot, and Katherine was wearing a knee-length cotton slip, with scallops of lace trimming the swollen top-curve of her breasts. Her legs were propped on the railing; she held a cigar in one hand and

a bottle of beer in the other. After taking a look at Klara, who was layered in petticoats and ankle-length skirts, she let out a long, low whistle.

“Honey-girl,” she said, “you best get on over here and let my Jake help your husband finish that work. You’ll drop dead in this heat shrouded up like that, looking like a nun hiding from a priest in the abbey.” Then she tossed back her head and laughed louder than Klara had ever heard a woman laugh. The sound of it reminded Klara of a sick horse her father had had years back. The old nag had snorted just like that for days, then died in the barn, legs poking straight up toward heaven.

From that moment on, Drago despised Katherine, and Klara loved her desperately.



In the middle of the nineteenth century, at a time when a stout rotten-egg stench billowed up out of the steel mills and coated the earth, sinking fingers and toes into skinny places between houses, Thirsty was carved into the steep slopes above the Monongahela River. It was just outside the city of Pittsburgh in the southwest corner of Pennsylvania, and although on the map, the town was called Pleasant Slopes, its residents—mostly immigrants from eastern and southern Europe—called it Thirsty.

While most mill towns were perched on sheer slopes, Thirsty was built on a terrace, with several hundred acres of scruffy farmland surrounding it. One precipitous, winding road connected it to the river valley below, but because gravel, mud, waste, and discarded odds and ends often washed down the hill during rainstorms and gathered in unmanageable piles in the crooks and coils of the snaking road, men heading to and from their shifts in the mills chose to trample footpaths through the dense forest of straight-backed pines and leafy maples.

Not many outsiders had cause to visit Thirsty back then, but every ten years a neatly pressed census-taker from the government bureau would climb the hill for a head count, trying to figure how many lost and how many gained. When he finally made it to Thirsty, sweat-soaked and panting, he always glimpsed a few pale-skinned, dark-browed Croat women huddled on a stoop, brooms gripped in raw-knuckled hands, babies cradled on their hips. He would stand there, on the edge of their lives, shifting his weight from one foot to the other while soot gathered in the folds of his shirt and smeared his spit-shined shoes. And the women, who rarely saw the cut of a man's face in the daylight unless he was crawling from bed for the next shift or stumbling from the chilled darkness of Penny's Saloon, would cock their heads and squint their eyes, trying to place him in their world. They would wonder over him, this short-winded, sugar-bellied man who bore no resemblance to their own lean-muscled, taut-jawed men who stood with their weight planted evenly on both feet. But even so, they always smiled and opened their circle to him. And he, mistakenly thinking them not so different from his own wife and her hen friends on the stoop of their cool valley home, missed the gravity lining their smiles. He missed the longing in their eyes, not knowing which had lost their husbands in mill accidents and which wished they had.

On the backs of these solid-footed men, steel magnates had built up their mills until they stretched like great fire-breathing dragons along the banks of the Allegheny and Monongahela rivers, all the way to the point where the two meet to form the Ohio, and beyond. The platforms and furnaces, ladders and ladles, railroad tracks, sheds, columns, and smokestacks were strung together like the bones of a massive metal skeleton. In these places, the air boiled, heavy with soot. Flames lapped, sparks skittered, and a single dissonant note was drawn out over space and time. It spread

between the banks of the rivers—the clanging of metal on metal, the slur of shovel-heads into slag, the screech of train cars pulling in and out, the grind of wheelbarrows, saws, and chains—sound that shook the earth from water’s edge to highest peak.

Intoxicated by the exchange of hot metal for money, mill owners ignored the filthy falling-down towns that littered the mountainside like abandoned bird nests. They settled their own families in the gently sloping valleys where water was easily pumped from fresh springs to fill their bathtubs and porcelains pitchers, while mill families had barely enough water to boil an egg. Back then, the City Council Water Commission laid pipe according to how much potential tax revenue the residents of any given town offered, so it wasn’t until well after the turn of the twentieth century that ditches were dug for pipes and pumps in Thirsty. Each morning, until that time, as the sun crept unwillingly into the yellow marbled sky, the women trudged to the pump at the base of the steepest hill and lugged buckets of water, slung on yokes over their shoulders, back to their kitchens and alleyways.



The Bozics’ house was plain. A squat, gray box in a line of squat, gray boxes, houses built out of necessity, not love. But despite its shape and color, Klara saw that the house had potential. There was a kitchen, a living and dining area with a large fireplace, and three small rooms upstairs for sleeping. There was even a cellar and a small crawlspace above the second floor for storage. Katherine and Jake’s house was on one side, so close the women could pass a cup of polenta from kitchen window to kitchen window. On the other side and behind were a garden and a small copse of fruit trees. While Drago and Jake unpacked, Katherine pointed to the house across the way, a ramshackle shed with planks patched over holes and a leaning roofline.

“That’s Tiny’s house,” she said. “He’s been a bitter, coarse man since his wife died ten years back. Stay clear of him.”

The new house was much larger than the one Klara had grown up in, but since the last tenants had packed their belongings and left the house clean and bare, it didn’t have the markings of a home yet. That will come, Klara thought, and in spite of her trepidations, she considered her blessings. She would no longer have six brothers sleeping in the room next door; the garden offered promise with hard work; and already she’d made a friend.

As she walked up the stairs for the first time, Klara noted the creak on the third step. She thought about Drago’s behavior in the wagon when she cried. Any tenderness he’d shown throughout their brief time together in Croatia and on the boat had nearly disappeared. She was looking out the window in the second bedroom when she realized she’d married a man just like her father, and just like her father, she’d have to watch Drago now. She would have to be on guard. Though she’d come into this marriage wide open, already she found herself closing slowly, like a honeysuckle bloom in the afternoon sun.



Despite Drago’s protests, custom called for a welcome party the next day.

“I don’t even have a job yet,” Drago complained when he heard the news. “And the journey wore me out.”

“I don’t think it’s up to us,” Klara said. “Your brother will be there. I want to meet him.”

“You can meet him quietly. We don’t need a party for that.” Drago’s voice was thick again.

“It’s not up to us,” Klara repeated, and then she left him alone in the kitchen. Though she didn’t like the fluctuations of his temperament, Klara was quickly becoming accustomed to them.

The night before, they had slept on a straw mattress on the floor of the bedroom. The fires of the smokestacks had lit the room so brightly it might have been noontime. Klara had wanted to fall into a heavy sleep and dream about home, but instead she had spent the entire night listening to the sounds of the mill and watching shadows move about on the walls. Drago had snored, and this surprised her. He hadn't snored on the boat or in the small rooming houses they'd stayed in along the way. She'd stared at him while he slept, studied his chin and the taut expression on his face. Even in sleep, he looked stern. Had she noticed this on the doorstep of her father's house? Had she missed it?

The next morning, Katherine overheard Drago's protests through her kitchen window, but she ignored them. She cooked all morning, and at noontime, Klara found her covered head to foot in flour and breadcrumbs.

"*Dozvolite da vam pomognem,*" she insisted, reaching for a pan, ready to help.

"*Ne, ti sjedi,*" Katherine said. "You sit." And she pointed to a soft-cushioned chair in the corner. "Long journeys call for rest, not work. You've got years ahead for that."

In a final attempt to put an end to the party plans, Drago stomped about on Katherine's porch and raised his fist. Katherine laughed, but Klara stood back and watched from behind a door. After a bit, Jake took charge. He grasped Drago by the arm and walked him down the road to the mill, with a promise to stop at Penny's Saloon for a beer and a hand of cards on the way home. Jake was a bear of a man—tall, broad, hairy, and strong. But he was gentle, too, and when he first met Klara, he had shaken her hand and leaned in to give her a light kiss on the cheek.

After they disappeared over the crest of the hill, Klara stood at the back door of Katherine's kitchen and stared at the smokestacks that rose up out of the river valley like tree trunks stripped of their leaves and life.



“Do they ever stop?” she asked.

Katherine was busy making custard. “Does what ever stop?” she said.

“The smokestacks.”

“Do they ever stop what?”

“Do they ever stop steaming, smoking, spitting?”

“The stacks?” Katherine laughed. “Oh, every once in a while when the men go on strike, but usually they burn twenty-four hours a day, all year long. Not even a day off for Christmas or the Sabbath.”

Klara looked beyond the smokestacks at the sky. It was mottled and yellowed. Repulsive.

“Even Sundays?” she said.

“Even Sundays,” Katherine said.

No matter how long she considered people doing work on the Sabbath, Klara couldn’t imagine it, even making steel, a material that seemed somehow sacred to these people. At home, with a never-ending haul of work to accomplish on the farm, most everyone was still and respectful on the Sabbath. Even the pigs. Klara lifted her nose like a hound seeking a scent and her eyes watered.

“What is that smell?” she asked. “All night it kept me awake.”

“Rotten eggs,” Katherine said. When Klara looked to the bowl of eggs on the table, Katherine caught herself and clarified. “The mill.”

Klara shook her head and thought of home. There, ruddy apples weighed down the limbs of gnarled trees that had stood in the family orchard for centuries and thick-skinned grapes full of sweetness hung heavily on vines behind the house. Years before, her grandmother had tied a swing to the thickest branch of an apple tree, and if you pumped your legs hard enough, you could touch the leaves on the top of the tree with your toes. But Thirsty was different, separate, far away, farther away than she’d imagined. She wasn’t sorry

she'd left Croatia, but she wished she'd landed someplace other than this. She would be someone else in this place. She already was.

When things got too quiet, Katherine interrupted. "What is your mother like?" she asked.

"She died last year," Klara said. "She got sick on a Wednesday, a pain deep in her belly. Three Wednesdays later, my father dug a hole in the meadow behind our house, and we laid her in it."

Katherine wiped a bit of sugar from the rim of a bowl and licked her finger. "I'm sorry."

"Yes, it was hard. But even before that, my mother was busy with too many sons. I am the only girl, bound to service as soon as my closest brother was born. Second mother, he called me when he wanted to rile me. Because of the children, my mother was impatient, quick to anger. Once when Momma was feeding one of the little ones, I dropped a blue milk pitcher her mother had passed to her. Milk spilled, and the floor was covered with pale blue pieces of porcelain. When she heard the crash and saw what I had done, she came unraveled and slapped me in the face."

Katherine nodded. "And your father?"

"Oh, he's just a mean old man."

"Anything like your husband?"

"I didn't think so when I met Drago, but now I'm not so sure."

Katherine laughed. "You'll find out lots of things in these first few months. Some good. Some not so good."

"Is that how it worked for you and Jake?" Klara asked.

"Hhmmm. No, we've been married a long, long time now, and I still haven't found a not-so-good trait in Jake. But he's one of the rare ones. Most of them come troubled and rough."

Klara paused, wiped her finger along the edge of the sugared bowl like Katherine had, and licked it.

“Klara,” Katherine said, “what did you dream about last night?”

The question stopped Klara short. She’d never thought of saying out loud the things she saw in her dreams. No one had ever asked.

At that moment, they heard voices. Drago’s brother Janko, his wife Luisa, and their children arrived first. When they saw Klara, they hugged and kissed her. With Klara, Janko spoke Croatian, but because Luisa was a Spaniard, he spoke English with her and the children. The language was coarse against Klara’s ears, and after a bit, she decided it sounded like the bumps and rattles of a wagon’s wheels against a dirt road hardened by drought. She listened hard, knowing her survival in this place depended on her learning.

Soon after, Drago and Jake returned from the mill.

“Well?” Katherine asked.

“I begin working in three days,” Drago said. He was high, giddy, already a little drunk, and his happiness was infectious. He picked up Klara at the waist and swung her like a bale of hay. Although his joy and attention seemed authentic, Klara resisted his touch. Something like fear pushed at her. Katherine, too, watched with caution. This man was no good, she believed. It was a deep feeling, and Katherine trusted deep feelings.

Then the party moved outside where it was cooler. The children raced through the cornstalks in Katherine’s garden, and the grownups spoke of home. Luisa, whose black hair and olive skin shone bright under the fiery mill skies, sang a beautiful song in a language no one but she understood. The men drank heavily, and within a few hours, Drago was laughing at everything, even Katherine’s stories. But his laughter wasn’t light. It didn’t float into the night sky with Klara’s and Katherine’s and Jake’s. It buried itself in the ground, dug into the earth like a rat. When Klara touched his shoulder to bid him to come home, he turned

on her. “Lady, leave me be. I’ll be home when I’m home.” He slapped her hand. When she stared and made a small sound of protest, he raised his hand to strike again. Janko turned away and toasted a friend, respecting the privacy of husband and wife, but Jake stood and shadowed Drago.

“I know you’re new here, brother,” he said, “and you’re welcome. But you’ll not strike your wife while I’m around.”

“I don’t know that it’s any of your business what I do,” Drago said.

“That’s where you’re wrong, friend. Now put your hand down.”

Without answering, Drago lowered his hand, but not his eyes. Klara shivered. She pulled her shawl around her shoulders, nodded to Katherine and Luisa, then disappeared into the shadow of the great pine tree that separated the small yards.



It was with the first season of fruit that Klara would always equate the first time Drago struck her full in the face, taking her from whole to broken. The peach trees in their yard were stunted, long neglected by the previous tenant, and the peaches that year were small, hard knobs of pit that even the birds rejected. Unwilling to sacrifice a season of preserves, pies, and her favorite cobbler, Klara bought peaches from the shop in town owned and operated by BenJo, a Negro man. But this choice didn’t come free of worry because from the beginning, Drago had forbidden her to even step into such a place.

“BenJo’s a nigger,” he said whenever the subject came up. “And we don’t eat nigger fruit.”

Before arriving in Thirsty, Klara didn’t know any Negroes. She hadn’t even seen a Negro until she landed in America. All she knew was what Drago told her about the ones who worked on his gang in the mill, *spooks* that talked in a

language no good hunky understood. He called them all kinds of names that never felt quite right to Klara: *niggers, ghost-men, pickaninnies, slaves, jigaboos, jungle monkeys*. He said the women weren't any better than the men. "They're baby killers and thieves," he told her. "The daddies sell their own children for money and booze, and the womenfolk cast spells on anyone who wrongs them. Doers of evil," he said over and over, "and don't you forget it."

Klara didn't believe anyone could hand out such evil other than the devil himself so the temptation to disobey her husband was great. Even so, she was careful, and for days before stepping into the store, she made the journey to town to study BenJo. She hid behind wagon beds and passersby near his shop and poked her head up when she thought BenJo couldn't see her. From these vantage points, she watched him fill the bins in front of the store with plums and apples and oranges. She watched him sweep the stoop with a whisk broom. She even watched him bargain with a white man. Unknown to her was the fact that he was watching her, too, wondering why this pretty young white woman, with a husband already known to have Beelzebub's temper, was spying on him.

So while it might have been the need for peaches that got Klara to BenJo's stoop, it was curiosity that got her through the door. After all, he was the only black man in town who owned a store, and he was the only person anyone in Thirsty had ever known to be permanently bent over at the waist at a nearly perfect ninety-degree angle, as if someone had folded him over as a baby and gotten him stuck. Of course, Drago promised that such a frailty could only be the result of a spell cast by a wronged jigaboo woman, but because BenJo never told anyone but his wife how his curious angle came to be, no one knew for sure.

Once through the door, BenJo noted Klara's presence quietly and let her work be her own. For a good while, she

stayed in the back, near the bins of vegetables lost in shadow. She wondered about the white women who talked so mightily to this bent-over Negro man, who took bundles of carrots out of his pink-palmed hands and shared stories as though they were old friends. It didn't make sense paired up with Drago's tales. That first time, Klara tried to keep her head low, but somewhere in the middle of filling her basket, BenJo walked right up to her. He lifted a peach from the bin, pushed it to his nose, and drew in a breath.

"This is how you pick a peach, Mrs. Bozic," he said.

She was surprised he knew her name. But she was even more surprised that his voice was so deep, so full of echo and shadow. It stopped her and made her listen.

"Fruit comes from the earth, like you and me," he said. He had a wide, flat nose, and his skin was black, black as the soot Drago carried home on his boots, but shinier, smoother, like a pleat of sky over her home village in Croatia. But as hard as she looked, she couldn't find a way into his face until he smiled and tapped a finger to the tip of his nose.

"This," he said, "this nose. My gift from the Almighty."

Klara shook her head, confused by the word *Almighty*. Her language skills were improving, but many words still brought her to a halt.

BenJo paused, then said, "My nose is a gift from God."

Klara smiled. She understood gifts from God, and in the years to come, she would become intimate with this particular one. She would depend on it for culling the finest produce from the stock when her own garden didn't provide. She would use it to help her figure out what was missing from yesterday's stew, carrying a few spoonfuls in a covered bowl all the way from her home to the shop. Over time, she and BenJo would share recipes for strudels and pies and homemade sausages, each one sending Drago into an angry roar. He made it clear that he would rather die than eat fruit or vegetables touched by BenJo's hands. Every

time he bit into a pie, not knowing whether the fruit was from their garden or the shop, he would holler, “You best start getting your fruit at some other shop, lady! A spook can’t be trusted.”

When Klara left the store that first time, she obviously wasn’t as comfortable with BenJo as the women who’d been shopping there for years, but their friendship had a definite beginning. She took the sack of peaches, shook BenJo’s hand, and went home to make a pie.

News traveled fast in a mill town, and by the time Drago returned from his shift at the mill, he already knew about the origins of the pie. Without a word, he walked into the house, threw the pie out the back door into a mound of dirt, and punched Klara in the face like a first-class boxer taking down his opponent. There was no hesitation or restraint. His fist met her cheek clean on the bone, and she hit the floor hard.

“We’re not eating nigger fruit,” he said as he walked out the door.

A few minutes later, Katherine found Klara lying on the floor. “That son of a bitch,” she said, tending to the cheek. “Jake will take care of this.”

And as he would time and time again, Jake did. When he returned from the mill that night, he pinned Drago against the trunk of the pine tree until he confessed his crime, apologized, and promised not to hit his wife again. But like her mother’s blue milk pitcher, Klara was already broken, and she knew her husband had made a promise he would never keep.