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Day of Lasts

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Day of Lasts

His eyes were the color of the chocolate-covered cherries displayed in the windows of the shop Lidia passed on her way to school every morning. He removed his gloves, their leather as smooth as liquid, and pressed them flat in sideways prayer on top of the envelope containing the train ticket and passport. He reached across the café table, flicking ash from the end of his cigarette, the sleeve of his camel-hair coat riding up to reveal a gold watch strangling his fleshy wrist.

“So. What do you think?”

At fifteen, Lidia had already become familiar with the way boys looked at her, so different from even a year ago. But this? This was something entirely new.

Leaving on a jet plane. Don't know when I'll be back again. Her father used to sing that to her when she was little and couldn't fall asleep. A friend who'd fled before the revolution had pulled some strings at the post office and sent him a collection of records he kept hidden in the back of the bedroom closet. Her father's English was terrible, but Lidia hadn't cared; she just liked the song, liked the sound of his unsteady voice—one she had begun to forget—wrestling with the tune. Now that she knew what the words meant, she imagined that her father had played a part in this whole situation. Maybe he, too, would be in France, waiting for her, and not, as her mother insisted, in Bucharest with his new family.

“What's that smile for, huh? I convinced you?”

“Listen, sir—”

“—What did I tell you? It's Gheorghe.”

“Sorry. Gheorghe.” Her cheeks burned. He was as old as her father. “Do you know a man named Marius Kovacs?”

“Hungarian? Not familiar with him, no. Should I be?”

He's my father, she wanted to say, but didn't.

Gheorghe smiled, the corners of his mouth turning up like the curls of bruise-colored smoke trailing from his cigarette. “You're gorgeous, you know that?”

The underside of Lidia's skin prickled. She imagined reaching up and plucking those delicious eyes from his face, popping them into her

mouth, the flawless texture on her tongue, the flavor—something rich, forbidden—melting there.

“Sorry.” He chuckled, holding up a hand. “That came out wrong. I just think you’ve got a career ahead of you. If you want it.”

“There were other girls at the disco the other night just as pretty as me.”

Gheorghe put out his cigarette, leaned back in his chair. “They didn’t have the look. Trust me. I’ve been in the business for years.”

She glanced down at the plate in front of her, where the croissant she’d ordered sat untouched. She understood now that she’d mistaken her hunger for something physical that could be assuaged with chamomile tea and a fresh slice of bread, when the real solution was sitting across from her, adjusting his scarf, tucking it under the lapel of his coat.

She pushed back his sleeve with her free hand, rubbing the cuff between her thumb and forefinger. “Be careful,” she warned. She was speaking in a voice she used with Ivan or one of the other boys from school. “Coffee stains are impossible to get out.”

“Thanks. I’ll keep that in mind.” He slipped his gloves back on and pushed the envelope closer to her. Lidia picked it up and began to open it, but he stopped her with a wiggle of his index finger. “Not now.”

“Sorry.” She pressed the envelope to her chest, felt her heart thrumming against the paper.

“Think about it.” His tone was buttery, soothing. “I don’t want you to do anything you don’t feel comfortable doing.”

“No,” said Lidia. “I want to do this.”

He crossed his arms over his chest as if he’d just finished eating a satisfying meal. “I’m glad to hear that, Lidia. I’m very, very glad.”

Sunlight trickled through the cracks of her bedroom curtains, landing somewhere near her closed eyes. Lidia knew without having to open them that the bed across from hers would be empty, the sheets thrown back, already cold, her nine-year-old sister Marianna still too young to appreciate sleeping in on the weekend. She slid her hand under her pillow, felt for the envelope. She didn’t bother pulling it out now; she’d looked at it every day over the past two weeks, pressed the paper to her nose to breathe in its crisp scent, licking a small corner of the adhesive as if to make sure it wasn’t some figment of her imagination. She’d read the itinerary, which took her first to Bucharest, where Gheorghe said he would be waiting for her. There was one small detail with her visa he

still needed to sort out, he'd explained; then, from there, they'd fly to Paris together.

In the kitchen, plates were being stacked, water run; a radio voice rattled out the day's news. She'd never flown on a plane before and had taken the train only a handful of times, to visit cousins a few hours south, in Timișoara. Tomorrow, all that would change. She ran her hand across the magazine pages she'd taped to the wall above her bed, her fingers coming away with the faint scent of perfume samples: *Destiny*, *Obsession*, *Fantasy*, *Euphoria*. She pressed her palm to her neck as she'd done so many times before, hoping a shadow of the scents would stick. Sometimes when Marianna saw her do this, she clambered over her, rubbing her own small hand to the paper, thrusting her palm under Lidia's nose, asking, *Did I get some?*

Lidia stretched and took a deep breath, her nostrils tingling from the cold. Today would be the last day she would wake to the impossible stench of garbage from the apartment block garbage bin, the last day she would be subjected to the roars and belches of her stepfather as he watched Saturday afternoon soccer, the last day she'd feel loathing toward her mother for marrying a man like him.

On cue, her mother called to her. "Lidia? Are you ready?"

She tugged a wool sweater over her head and socks on her feet and headed to the bathroom. She began to brush her teeth, then pulled the toothbrush from her mouth and pressed her face close to the mirror, inspecting her pores. A cluster of pimples had bloomed overnight, just below her lip, and were sure to attract the attention of her sister. *When will that happen to me?* Marianna's tone was always more inquisitive than anxious. *Why does it happen? How do you make it go away?*

Usually, Lidia didn't mind her sister's questions. Even if they were only about the mundane details of life, they gave Lidia a sense of authority she otherwise never experienced. It was as if by asking, Marianna imbued Lidia's existence with meaning. Since she'd met Gheorghe, however, Marianna's questions had become bricks, each one stacked onto Lidia's shoulders until the simple act of moving through the day had become difficult to bear.

"Lidia! Can you hear me? We need to get to the market before it closes!"

Lidia squeezed her eyes shut. The last day she'd hear her mother yell in a voice that could curdle fresh goat's milk. "Go without me!"

Someone rapped on the bathroom door. "Don't you want to see Ivan?" a muffled voice asked. Lidia knew that Marianna was standing on the other side, her curls springing from a knitted cap, her oversized boots

already pulled on, her face twisted into such silent agony that if Lidia were to see her sister, she'd want to kiss and smother her all at once.

Lidia smirked at her reflection in the mirror. "No," she said to the door, "I don't want to see Ivan."

For a moment, her sister's confusion hung silently between them.

"Go tell Mom I'll be ready in five minutes." She listened to the receding *shush-shush* of her sister's footfalls as she went to deliver the message.

Lidia shoved the toothbrush back into her mouth, the bristles making furious noises against her molars. The last day she would read bedtime stories to Marianna, feel the tickle of her sister's blond curls underneath her chin.

Firsts were just around the corner. Once she was settled, the first thing she would do would be to send for her sister.

Lidia unlatched the bathroom door and waited until she could hear her family's voices coming from the kitchen. Then she slipped outside and into the next room, certain no one had seen her.

Her mother and stepfather's bedroom was cast in dirty shadows, the heavy curtains not yet drawn. It didn't matter; Lidia had memorized its layout and moved swiftly across the cluttered space, careful not to trip over loose shoes, a pair of trousers, a strewn belt—anything that might sound an alarm bell. Her stepfather's dresser was against the far wall. Sometimes in the night she'd be woken by her mother yowling and scolding, a hip or elbow caught unexpectedly against the jutting corners of its top drawer, which he always left open.

Sliding her hand through the narrow crack, Lidia's searching fingers grappled under the piles of cloth—graying underwear and mismatched socks and wrinkled handkerchiefs—until she felt what she was looking for. From the thickness of it, she could tell that the pile of bills had only just been replenished. This was her revenge, most recently for the parallel lines of welts on the backs of her thighs, welts her stepfather claimed not to recall giving her.

She'd begun taking his money years before, whenever he harmed one of them. Later, when he scratched his head over its disappearance, her mother unwittingly—believing the truth of her words—provided reasons. "The drink, Daniel," she'd say. "It makes you forget how you've spent it." Normally, he accepted this explanation. Still, every once in a while, he turned on Lidia's mother, accusing her of stealing.

Today would be the last time. This time, to ensure that there would be no wrongful accusations, Lidia did something she'd never done before. Where the money had been, she left in its place a slip of paper. She

thought of the expression on her stepfather's face when he finally found the note. She'd simply written "I.O.U." and signed her name beneath it. Later, she'd reimburse him; she was composing the letter of explanation in her head already. *I'm as good as my word*, she'd say, enclosing a clipping from her latest shoot—*French Vogue*, *Elle*, *Mademoiselle*—the money wrapped inside the magazine pages like a pearl.

Turning around, Lidia nearly crashed into Marianna. "Jesus Christ! What are you doing in here?" Her sister didn't speak but remained standing, the expression on her face illegible. Lidia pinched Marianna's chin between forefinger and thumb. "Not a word of this, you understand?" She gave her sister's head a jerk before releasing her hold and hurrying past her, too shocked and ashamed by her own behavior to wait for a reply.

"You want some of my sausage, Lidi? It's fresh."

Lidia gazed up at the string of salami that hung from Ivan's steaming hand. What was it about the winter that held the saline smell of blood? She swore she could see droplets of it hanging like rubies in the crystalized air around her.

"I saved it just for you." He was trying to look nonchalant, but his tone was panting. The boys standing behind him laughed, slapping each other's backs. Lidia's lip curled. The last day she'd flirt with the butcher's son (so immature, a child really), or any boy for that matter. The last day she'd endure the fresh smell of death for the promise of something fleeting, fickle, something that always left her feeling dissatisfied.

Ivan had been with her at the disco the night she met Gheorghe. He still didn't know she'd spoken to anyone else, the pick-up happening right under his nose. But of course that was the wrong expression; it wasn't anything sexual, but a business transaction, the beginning of a career.

"How old are you?" Gheorghe had asked, setting a drink in front of her.

"Twenty."

"Like hell."

The business card he tossed on the table said *ABC Modeling Agency*. "I'm only in town for a day or two. Looking to recruit." He was studying her, his eyes moving from her face to her neck, chest, waist, legs. He wrote the time and location of a proposed meeting on the back of the card. "I think we could make something of you yet," he said. He was gone before Ivan had returned from the bar.

Later, Ivan gestured at the unfinished drink. “Where’d that come from?”

Lidia pushed it away from her. “Someone must have set it down and forgotten it.” She could feel the business card, which she’d slipped into her back pocket, pressing against her skin through her jeans.

Now, standing before Ivan, the frigid air was clarifying. Everything around her—the marbled slabs of meat, the stack of raw bones, the bleached cap on his dark head, the scarlet fingerprints on his butcher’s apron—was crisp, fresh, the intricate designs and details, the sharp edges and distinct shades and shadows magnified. She considered Ivan’s eager, open face, his jowls still soft and smooth, childhood not having entirely left him. What would he say if she told him the truth? Would his adulthood begin there, at that moment?

She stepped closer to the kiosk. “I’m not interested in your sausage,” she said. “I’ve found better.”

The boys roared, widening their eyes and mouths. Ivan blanched. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means—”

“Ivanko! Get back here and help me with this rack!”

Ivan jumped, the string of salami tumbling to the countertop. “Call you later? Maybe the disco? Paradiso again?”

Lidia shrugged. “Maybe,” she said, then once he’d disappeared to the back of the kiosk, “maybe not.”

From behind Lidia, a voice said, “What do you want with the Russian anyway?”

She turned. Anita was hatless, gloveless, and already bringing her face toward Lidia. As she leaned in to kiss her friend’s cheeks, she was struck by the ease of this gesture, the familiarity that had been there since grade school. Surely, if there was anyone she could trust with her news, it was Anita.

“Don’t you know they drink worse than Romanians?”

“You can have him,” Lidia said. “The Russian and I are through.”

Anita shivered at the meat in the glass cases and looped her arm through Lidia’s. “C’mon,” she said, directing her away from the butcher’s stand. “All those sheep heads give me the creeps.”

The girls wove through huddles of people, shoulders hunched and stiff against the cold, until they’d reached the *langoş* stand and took their place in line. Would there be Hungarians and Romanians in France? Lidia wondered. Would there be *langoş* for her to eat on Saturday mornings in the wintertime, after a long, luxurious sleep? Never mind. In

France, there'd be something else, something better: café au lait and croissants with a view of the Eiffel Tower.

"So are you serious about the Russian? You're kaput?"

Lidia didn't answer, placing her gloved hands over her friend's bare ones.

"Well, do you mind if I give him a whirl?"

"Sure."

Anita pulled her hands away. "I don't get it. It doesn't get much better than Ivan."

"So people tell me."

"It's true. He's hot. And after college, he'll inherit his dad's business. You'll be all set up."

Lidia couldn't get past the laundry she'd be expected to do, how it would stink of raw flesh, crushed bones, wet animal hair. She imagined water in a white bathtub going pink the way it had the time her father had gashed his hand—a clean cut that wouldn't stop bleeding—on the saw blade he'd been using to trim the lilac bush at the old farmhouse. She missed that farmhouse still, even though it had been more than six years since her mother had remarried and they'd moved into town.

Once, not long after he left, Lidia had asked her mother for her father's contact information. "Don't you think he'd have called you by now if he cared?" her mother had said, and then, frowning, flipped through the back pages of a beat-up address book and wrote down a number. Lidia called several times before anyone answered. When someone finally did, a voice she didn't recognize—a woman's voice—told her Marius wasn't home; who should she say had called? Lidia hung up. She never tried the number again.

"Blood stains are impossible to remove," she said now.

"You'll be rich enough to send things to the cleaners."

She handed Anita a piece of fried dough, still dripping with hot oil. "I'm rich already. See?" She revealed the stolen wad of bills before stuffing them back into her coat pocket. "It's on me today." She asked the man behind the counter for two cups of mulled wine. He took a long look at her but eventually ladled them out.

"What's with you today?"

"Nothing. It's just... What if I have other plans that don't include Ivan?"

Behind the stand they found some empty buckets to sit on while they ate. Lidia devoured her *langoş* without tasting it, taking bite after bite without swallowing, as if she feared someone might snatch it from her

hands. She hadn't been aware of her hunger and felt mildly embarrassed when, wiping her mouth, she saw that Anita had hardly begun to eat.

Anita grinned. "It's like my mom says. Hollow legs. How else to explain why you're not as big as an ox?"

"So which leg do you think it is?"

Anita gently rapped her raw knuckles on each of her friend's thighs. "The left. Most definitely the left."

Lidia crumpled up her napkin, tossing it for the frigid wind to blow away. She wondered how to tell Anita the story without the whole thing sounding unbelievable. *I met a man, the head of a modeling agency, and he's promised to take me to France.* She didn't know why she was worried. After all, it had been Anita who'd given her the magazines from which she'd cut out the pictures that now decorated her bedroom walls. Most of their time together they spent imagining a life beyond this place, a life like the ones they watched for endless hours on television. If Lidia confessed her news, Anita was sure to pepper her with questions. *When are you leaving? When can I come visit? Will there be a job for me someday?*

"What if you were given the chance to live your dreams?" Lidia said.

Anita stopped chewing. "You mean movies, modeling, that stuff?"

Lidia nodded. "What if someone told you you could do it? Would you?"

"It's fun to think about." Anita considered the food in her hand. "I'd miss my mom and dad. Could they go?"

"No, they couldn't go. It'd just be you alone."

"It's hard to think of leaving home."

"But it's your dream, Anita! You'd travel the world, date movie stars!"

Anita shrugged. "It's not gonna happen anyway, so what's the point of talking about it?"

Lidia swished the remaining liquid around in her cup and watched the spices settle like tea leaves before swallowing down the last of the wine. A bitter, vinegary taste lingered on her tongue.

The last day of eating *langoş* with Anita.

"Lidia? What's wrong?"

"Nothing." Lidia wiped her nose with the back of her hand and got to her feet. "My mom and sister are probably looking for me now. I better go."

Leaving their mother behind at the market, Lidia and Marianna were on their way to buy sweets when Lidia spied him: the back of the camel-hair coat, the broad shoulders, the heavy wrists. It didn't make sense, his being here, but there was no mistaking him. He was buying

a newspaper off the street, he and the salesman sharing a joke, looking at a picture Lidia couldn't see. Gheorghe was lecturing, instructing, his fingers running lines and curves over the paper as if it were a masterpiece and they were debating shade and shadows, brush technique, color palette, use of light. When he folded the paper, she saw what they'd been discussing: the page-ten pin-up. Lidia stopped on the sidewalk, not knowing what else to do.

"Why are we stopping?" Marianna asked. "Who's that?"

When Gheorghe turned around, the look of surprise was no more than a camera flash on his face before he was tucking the newspaper under his arm and kissing Lidia on her cheeks as if they were old friends who met like this all the time. "What a pleasant surprise."

She felt Marianna's hand wriggle in her own, felt the pressure of her sister's small body against her as she moved closer.

"Who's this?" Gheorghe was grinning stupidly at Marianna.

What are you doing here? Lidia wanted to ask. "This is my sister. Marianna."

"A beauty, just like you."

Lidia could feel Marianna and Gheorghe's eyes on her, but she couldn't bring herself to return their gazes. Instead, she focused on the newspaper, silently reading the day's headlines. A fatal, ten-vehicle pile-up on a nearby stretch of highway. The arrests of several county officials after it was discovered that they were taking bribes from the Russian mafia. The impact of revenue loss on municipal hospitals.

These things, Lidia thought, are bad news. Not *this*, right now. This, she told herself, is nothing, an encounter easily explained. She met Gheorghe's eyes. "You stayed—in town, I mean?"

"I was visiting some relatives in the area," he said, squinting past her. "Killing two birds."

Marianna began to jiggle at Lidia's side. She was trying to twirl, using her sister's arm as an axis, when she tripped, yanking Lidia so that her arm popped in its socket. "Goddamnit, Marianna! Stop it!"

Marianna blinked at Lidia, wriggling her fingers free from her sister's hold.

"I'm sorry—"

"Don't worry," Gheorghe replied, thinking the apology intended for him. He was tucking his wallet into the inside pocket of his coat and kept his hand there, over his heart, as if making a pledge. "So. I'll see you soon?"

Lidia watched as he dashed across the street, whistling to hail a cab.

The wooden shingle creaked back and forth above the two girls' heads, the name of the shop so worn that it was impossible to make out any letter except the E, which had been painted more elaborately than the rest, with a tail that swooped down and curled back on itself. Although she had accepted Lidia's conciliatory hand, Marianna hadn't spoken since Lidia had yelled at her, even as Lidia considered out loud what treats they might buy.

She herself didn't have to decide; she knew already what she wanted to get. She felt for the money inside her pocket, her fingers wrapping around the bills. "How about some of those?" she asked her sister, pointing at the neat row of chocolate-covered cherries.

Marianna exhaled as if she'd been holding her breath for several minutes. "You can't get those."

"Why not?"

"They're too much money. Mom will be mad."

But Lidia couldn't leave without an entire velvet box. "We're entitled to something special now and then." She gave her order to the woman behind the counter.

"Who was that man?"

Lidia pretended not to have heard the question, focusing her attention on the chocolates being selected and placed one by one in the box.

"*Lidia.*" Marianna tugged at her sleeve. "Who. Was. That. Man?"

"What man?"

"You *know.*"

"Gheorghe? Just someone I met at the disco."

Marianna wrinkled up her nose. "He wears too much cologne."

Lidia paid for the cherries and opened the lid. "Here. Take one."

"Why did he say he'll see you soon?"

"Why do you ask so many questions?" She pressed the box on Marianna. "I said take one."

She watched as her sister plucked a cherry and bit into it, holding up the uneaten half, inspecting its insides while she chewed. Red liquid oozed as slow as tree sap onto her pale thumb. "Well? How is it?"

Marianna swallowed. "Here." She placed the uneaten half back into the box, wiping her hands on her coat. "I don't want the rest."

"Is something wrong with it?"

"I don't like it."

Lidia laughed irritably. "But it's chocolate. You love chocolate."

"It tastes funny."

“Really?” Lidia popped the uneaten half into her mouth. Cocoa, cherry, a hint of liqueur: it tasted just as she’d imagined. “There’s nothing wrong with it. Don’t be stupid.”

Marianna’s chin quivered. She played with the buttons on her coat. “Can we go home now?”

Marianna’s hair hadn’t yet darkened to the rich auburn color of Lidia’s but was strawberry blond, the same as their father’s. As she washed her sister’s hair, Lidia hoped it would grow only fairer, something she knew was unlikely but struck her tonight as important.

Marianna sat in the tub between Lidia’s legs, both sisters naked, having bathed together every Saturday night since their father had left. Whatever had transpired earlier in the day seemed to Lidia to have dissipated, and now things were back to normal between them. Using a coffee cup, Lidia poured lukewarm water over Marianna’s head and squeezed the last of the shampoo out of the bottle, the sickly apricot scent forcing her to turn her face away as she worked the soap into a lather. Marianna’s boney arms were clasped around her knees, her back facing her sister. She never fussed—not when suds from the soap ran down over her eyes and lips or when the water was ice cold or when Lidia combed the tangle of damp curls, jerking her sister’s head backward, the only way to get through the dense hair.

When Lidia finished, she ran her fingertips down Marianna’s knobby spine, watching tiny goose bumps rise under her touch. She kissed each white shoulder, licking her lips. She enveloped Marianna with her arms and squeezed until her sister squirmed. Gray soap scum thickened on the surface of the water, and milky waves sloshed over the edge of the tub when they moved, making clattering noises on the floor tiles. Dinner smells crept under the door, clinging to the steamy post-bath air. “Cabbage, again.”

Marianna screwed up her face. “I hate cabbage.” Lidia watched her rise to her feet, water falling away from her sister’s body like thousands of tiny, silvery fish. It was as if she’d just been born.

“Pretty soon we’ll both be eating steak and hamburgers every evening for dinner.”

Marianna pursed her blue, trembling lips. “Really?”

Lidia didn’t answer, instead reaching for a towel, draping it over her sister’s shoulders, and rubbing the tail end against her hair.

“Bend over so I can wrap this around your head.”

Marianna leaned over and stared at her bare feet, wiggling her two big toes. “Did you see his shoes?”

“Whose shoes?”

“That man we saw today. They had metal on the tips.”

Lidia spread the towel over the back of Marianna’s hanging head, twisted it around her hair, and tucked the end under. The way Marianna kept mentioning Gheorghe unsettled her. “There.” She gave the terry-cloth turban a pat before wrapping up her own hair. “Come on. Dinner will be ready soon.”

“You’re not going out with Ivan tonight?”

The question surprised her. Lidia knew her sister didn’t much care for Ivan; he was, in Marianna’s eyes, responsible for the unfortunate deaths of all those innocent animals heartlessly slaughtered at the butcher’s stand. He was also the one who took Lidia to discos when she wasn’t allowed to go. But Lidia had sworn her sister to secrecy. “Not tonight.”

“Why not?”

“For months you’ve been begging me not to go, and tonight you ask why not?”

“Are you mad at him?”

“No, I’m not mad at him—”

“What’s wrong with him, then?”

“Would you *shut up* with the questions already?” blurted Lidia. Her words reverberated against the walls of the tiny room. Marianna shrunk back.

“I’m sorry.” Lidia pulled her sister toward her, pressing her against her chest the way she’d seen her mother do so many times before. “I’m sorry I said that.” Her fingers patted the toweled head. She tried the truth. “Honestly, I just want to spend the night with you.”

“What did I do?” Marianna sobbed into her belly.

“You didn’t do anything.”

“Then why are you mad at me?”

“I’m not mad.”

Abruptly, Marianna pulled away from Lidia, tears still streaking her cheeks. She turned and held her arms up. “Can you put my nightgown on now?”

Sighing, Lidia unfastened the towel wrapped around her sister’s head and folded it over the rack on the door. Hair unfurled down Marianna’s back in tight, damp springs. She tugged the nightgown over her sister’s head, helping her when she couldn’t get her arms through the narrow sleeves. Then she slipped on her own bathrobe, cinching the belt around her waist. When she tried to give her sister a hug, Marianna wriggled free.

After dinner, Lidia returned to their room to find Marianna buried under blankets, their bedtime story ritual cut short for the first time she could remember.

She waited until her mother and stepfather turned out the lights that leaked from under their bedroom door and then waited two hours more. The warped, bubbling tiles just outside the kitchen that creaked whenever she stepped on them were all it would take to wake someone. It had happened once before, when Lidia had wanted to go to a party her stepfather believed her too young for. She remembered the terror she'd felt, her hand still gripping the knob of the front door as his figure appeared at the opposite end of the hall. *Where the hell do you think you're going, missus?* The following Monday at school, Anita's endless chatter about the party had angered Lidia so much she'd snapped at her, telling her to shut her fat mouth, nobody cared about some stupid high-school party.

Oh, the parties she'd soon attend! She smiled to herself, hugging the manila envelope to her chest as she lay in bed, waiting. There would be so many parties like the ones she'd seen on television and in the magazines. "Anita's mother lets her spend money on magazines like this?" her mother always tut-tutted as she slowly flipped through the slick pages, unable to resist a glimpse herself. "Who wears such clothes?" Lidia could tell by her tone that her mother had been just as awestruck as she was.

The streetlamp outside her window illuminated the room enough that she could make out a few of the pictures on the wall above her head. Women in satin party dresses holding cocktail glasses and pouting at men who stared at them adoringly. Women who smirked out at Lydia from the glossy pages, as if to ask, *Don't you want what I've got?* The pictures looked so delicious Lidia would have ripped them down that very moment, shoved them into her mouth, and swallowed them whole if she'd known it wouldn't have woken up Marianna.

She peeled back her covers, placing her feet flat on the floor. "Marianna? Are you awake?"

No response.

Marianna slept with her back toward Lidia; she needed to get up and stand over her sister to see her face. This close, she could make out the rhythmic whistle of her sister's breath, the rising and receding of blankets she clasped in fists under her chin. When they were still living with their father, the sisters used to share a bed. Marianna slept so soundlessly that sometimes Lidia would panic, shaking her sister until she sputtered and moaned, complaining, "What is it? What do you want?"

She did not know where this fear of her sister dying in her sleep came from. When the impulse gripped her, there was nothing Lidia could do about it; she had to wake Marianna.

“Marianna?” The soles of her feet were already cold as Lidia tiptoed to her sister’s bed. Brushing her sister’s still-damp hair with her fingers, she worked hard to resist the impulse now, giving her a half-hearted shake. She knew waking Marianna was risky. There’d be the usual litany of questions that might be hard to answer and, more terrifying, Marianna begging her—persuading her—not to go.

She made a mental note of Marianna, studying the gently upturned nose, the lips pursed but turned down at the corners, the brow furrowing and releasing, as if Marianna were dreaming about an argument or something she found disagreeable. All these details would be captured in Lidia’s mind, the last image she would have of her sister for a long while.

From under her own bed she removed a small duffel bag that contained a change of clothes and the remainder of her stepfather’s money and slid the envelope containing the passport and train ticket inside. Her fingers grappled until she found the rest of the chocolates; she placed the box on the desk that she and Marianna shared and on top of it a note she hoped explained everything. Then she picked up her shoes and slunk out of the bedroom and down the hall.

Even the apartment door, warped, resistant, normally requiring a firm tug or two to get it open, tonight relented, smooth and soundless on its hinges. *It’s a sign*, Lidia thought as she stepped through the opening, even as her throat tightened, closing up, making it difficult for her to breathe.