

## Deluge

By Ewa Bronowicz

You always disapproved of people who couldn't spend a night outdoors, and I wanted you to be wrong. I was waiting for a shuttle in front of Woori Bank, and began regretting my enthusiastic "yes" directed at Jane two days before, when she'd suggested a trip to a Korean spa in Queens. I was worried she'd discover the truth about me, that I wasn't cool, and that I was Polish, one hundred percent Polish. Jane was my co-worker and one of those people who got along with everyone and whom everyone confided in. The previous weekend I'd invited her to go camping in Rhode Island. We took a train to Westerly, and then a taxi, at Jane's insistence, to the camping ground. Despite her complaints about the biting mosquitoes and no bathroom in the proximity of our tent, which gradually if not by Jane's collusion led me to introduce the idea of staying at a nearby motel and, to my embarrassment, getting a refund from the camping ground for "intolerable conditions," the inescapable intimacy of sharing what turned out to be a florid large room with her instead of a tent pleased me. I'd been trying to make an American friend, a true blood and bones American. Jane seemed to represent the fruit of my efforts.

She was twenty-eight, one year my senior, and spoke English in flying sentences full of idioms and slang, most of which I understood but would have never been able to use myself. At night, sitting on our beds covered in pink sheets in place of sleeping bags, sipping wine from tall water glasses, we talked about boyfriends, movies, and Buddhism, an "awesome" religion that Jane had been in the process of discovering. I didn't mention my upbringing under your dotting eyes, the times you and I had furtively gone to the lake

where you taught me how to swim so that I could impress my brothers, or the times you allowed me to sit in the back of your classroom so that I could watch you lecture about Gombrowicz and Dostoevsky as if they were your best friends; I didn't mention you to Jane. When she inquired about my background, I invented stories that I would have liked to have happened and which were already, to me, bordering on reality. Instead of Katowice there was London, where I'd nannied one summer. Jane told me about her multiple flings with American men who'd invite her to dinner, then a bar, and then to their apartment, offers she'd accept with an ease I suspected I would never acquire, and I automatically wondered what you, whom I used to call "medieval" referring to your old-school views on romance, would have said about Jane's escapades; then I quickly dismissed you altogether—I didn't need you anymore. I now had Jane and the morning after our night at the hotel I considered her to be a close friend. We waved each other goodbye at Grand Central, Jane heading to her spacious East Harlem apartment she shared with four other people, all American, and me traveling to my Greenpoint studio. One could spend a whole lifetime in Greenpoint without knowing one word of English, a fact I overtly resented. Back in my apartment, I pictured Jane talking about our Rhode Island trip to her roommates, and I couldn't wait to see her the next day at work—we were both English As a Second Language teachers at a private language school in Midtown Manhattan. On Monday morning, I welcomed her with a big smile and a binding look, but Jane, surrounded by another co-worker whispering something into her ear in a corner of a narrow hallway, barely noticed me and for the rest of the day engaged herself in clandestine conversations with what seemed to be every single teacher around. You would have said that Jane was disrespectful or double-faced, and maybe that was

why I didn't give up on her and would soon realize, with some dismay, that she was simply happy to spend a weekend with anyone who asked her. If they were cool, that is.

It was Jane's idea, going to a Korean spa, somewhere in Flushing, Queens. She'd read about the place in Vogue magazine, her obligatory monthly read. She said it'd be "awesome." As we rode the subway, periodically above ground, the initially clear March day gradually turned hazy and it was now drizzling. Standing at a corner of a mega-size parking lot, Jane debated whether she should spend Christmas in Puerto Rico, with a man she had a crush on. The cold air wrapped itself around me like a snake, tightly and desperately. I wore my favorite boots, tall, with pointy toes, ribbon-tied all the way up in the back, and suddenly, under Jane's scrupulous gaze, I realized how worn out they were. "I have to buy new boots," I said to her, feeling apologetic, unlike myself. You would have laughed at me and repeated your standard "who cares what others think" motto. Following my desire to triumph over you I decided I'd buy a new coat as well, something "in," like Jane's, because the one I had, black and boring, looked like something you would wear.

"Where the hell is the shuttle?" Jane's overwrought voice once again reminded me of her ability to speak her mind, a trait I'd found courageous and American. "I went out with my students last night and have this awful hangover," she added, extending the word "hangover" like her pink chewing gum, one of her inseparable accessories, which she'd chew as if there was no tomorrow, stubbornly and without a pause. You always said that chewing gum while talking was impolite, and now I smiled at Jane and asked her if I could have a piece.

Jane was cool. Whenever I thought of describing her, “cool” was the first word that came to mind. Born and raised in Los Angeles, she told me she’d moved to New York to try something new. She went out with her students as if they were her friends, on the spur of the moment. I imagined her in a bar the night before, in tight clothes and heavy make-up, chatting away in her tipsy voice while the Korean and Japanese men or women stared at her like they stared at the Statue of Liberty or the Empire State Building. I was no one’s Statue of Liberty nor did I ever go out with my students, both because I didn’t want to and because I was never asked to.

Still, I wanted to know more about Jane’s adventures, a forbidden fruit I could taste through her and which was otherwise unavailable. “Where did you go?” I looked at her and envied her long legs, a result of yoga and no dinner on most nights, and her straight black hair, long and shiny, which she redyed every three weeks and which she wore in a different style every day, as if she came out of a hair salon. You always said you preferred to read than to waste time in front of a mirror. Surely you would look down on Jane for blow-drying and styling her hair in the mornings, an endeavor that, I knew, cost her about thirty minutes each day. But she always looked great. Today her hair was tied back, Jane’s pony tail and perfectly even bangs spilling out of her white hat. Her coat, brown leather with a hood, was a perfect match to her brown-black-white rain boots, the newest fashion statement in New York, although I still couldn’t justify spending seventy dollars on a pair of boots my grandmother had used in the garden, peeling off weeds and planting flowers and vegetables.

“Somewhere downtown,” Jane mumbled, and shrugged like a cat, taking out a black and blue striped umbrella from her bag. The rain was suddenly falling down

heavily, as if it were in a hurry to stop and get it over with. Jane unfolded the umbrella and covered herself with it, offering me a small corner of it. I felt the restless drops of water landing on my left arm and leg. A woman and a young girl, both Asian, approached us and positioned themselves nearby, presumably also waiting for the shuttle. The woman carried a small umbrella and held it up for the girl, exposing half of her own body to the rain. The girl, perhaps eight or nine years old, held on to her mother's hand. I was struck by the sharp resemblance between them. The mother wore a yellow nylon coat and blue jeans which, as I noticed, looked out of style, and I remembered that you had a similar pair and wore them often when we all went camping. Jane surveyed the woman as if she were a director looking for an actress to fill in the main role. "What an ugly coat," she said, without trying to lower her voice, as if assuming that the woman did not speak English. "And the jeans—maybe a few centuries ago, but not in 2008." This time her effrontery made me think about going up to the Korean woman and telling her that her coat and jeans were actually quite charming. Jane asked what I did last night.

Two of my Polish neighbors had invited me to go out dancing, but I declined, and instead spent the evening alone, munching on Wedel, the Polish chocolate of my childhood, and rewatching Almodovar's "All About My Mother," an intensely moving and inspiring story of a woman who loses her teenage son on the day of his birthday. "I went out to a club with some friends," I lied, guessing that staying in on a Friday night was social suicide for the savvy Jane. If Jane could only believe that I was cool, that I was like her, my life would transform into an all-American success story.

The daughter gestured towards a van pulling into the parking lot. She wore no hat, exposing her long jet black hair that was the same color as her eyes, both an exact copy

of her mother's. I remembered my own striking resemblance to you, the forever- young-looking mother, so much that people asked if you were my older sister, flattery to which you responded with a natural laughter that now resounded in my ear. I used to love your laughter, so carefree and pure, but in my final years of high school it turned fake, or at least I thought so, and began to resent it, shutting my ears every time I heard it. I now hoped that the young girl took me for an American.

The van stopped and a young man with somber eyes and a scar across his cheek addressed the mother in what must have been Korean. She climbed into the car, followed by her daughter and Jane who couldn't resist exclaiming her "Finally!" like a monarch. I quickly compared the name on the van—Thespa—with the one on the brochure and walked in. There were three other people in the back, one man and two women, middle-aged, all with black hair and dark eyes. None of them smiled back at me. I condemned them in my mind for being indecorous, but then remembered that Koreans, and Asians in general, were much more reserved than Americans. Like the Poles. Like you. When I first came to America seven years ago, you would have been proud of me. I grew suspicious of everyone who gave me a friendly nod, not to mention a smile, on the street, in a store, at school. Having lived through Communism and several government interrogations, something you never talked about and which I learned from your friend Basia, you had successfully if prematurely killed naivety in all of your three children, and for that, too, I blame you.

"What are you doing tonight?" I asked Jane, in a casual voice I had to fish out from the bottom of my pockets. It was warm in the van, and my body was beginning to relax in the comfort of the soft leather seat, as if a heavy weight was just taken off it.

“Don’t know yet.” Jane reached her hand into a shiny green bag—all fake leather, as she’d proudly told me, her recent sixty-dollar find—and took out a lipstick. She smeared her lips and strawberries grew all around me. “Want some?”

“No, thanks,” I said, taken aback. No one had ever offered me their lipstick before. When I was fifteen I asked you if I could use your lipstick before going to a birthday party, and you said I was too young for that. I protested, saying that my friends would be wearing make-up. “Then don’t go,” you replied, and made me call my friend and cancel the visit.

We were stuck behind a bus, slowly moving along. The Koreans in the back were now quiet; only the mother was whispering something softly to her daughter, caressing her hair. The rain danced rhythmically on the roof of the van, with desperation that reminded me of the rain that flooded our city a few years before I’d left, just before my summer in London. We passed a beat up gas station, several small houses with bicycles or small cars parked in front of them. Jane said that the houses “badly needed a paint job,” and that she hoped they were not being “kidnapped by a bunch of weirdos,” but I felt strangely attracted to what by American standards would be called poverty. The water colored the neighborhood gray, making it look lifeless and pallid, bringing to mind our apartment in Katowice, with pieces of cement falling off every time heavy wind blew against it. I thought about the correlation between the exterior of one’s house and its interior mood, and how one affected the other. When I’d decided to go to America, I’d told you that I would live in a mansion with an outdoor swimming pool, not a “shed,” and that I would make my dreams come true, unlike the “cowards.” By “shed” I meant our apartment, and by “cowards” I meant you who had dreamed of being a journalist but

instead got pregnant, married, received a teaching degree, became a teacher, and brought up three children while cooking dinner for my father every night of your life. But of course you knew that already.

I, too, wanted to be a journalist. I had a degree from the University of Connecticut in Stamford. I'd waitressed and babysat my way through four and a half years of college, and dreamed of attending Columbia School of Journalism, known for its prestige, high cost and selectivity. When I had come across an ad for a TESOL course, which certifies one to teach English as a Second Language, I signed up. It'd be a good way to get away from spilled drinks and crying babies with uninvolved mothers while gaining points on my resume for my graduate school application, one or two years later, I reasoned and didn't dare tell you I was going to be a teacher. The course was intense but I emerged from it with pride, informed by the instructors that my writing skills were better than those of my classmates. I was the only non-native speaker in the group; I wanted to share my success with you. At my job interview at the language school, I made up a story that I was bilingual in English and Polish due to my mixed heritage—Polish on my father's side and English on my mother's. You became a Brit and I got the job.

The first class I taught was to beginners. They were mostly Asian people in their late teens and early to mid-twenties, timid and respectful, with their parents' credit cards and i-Pods lighter than my golden necklace with a cross, a going away gift from you and my father, which I wore underneath shirts. I enjoyed teaching and found ways to creatively engage my students in interactive activities. I prevaricated about my origin with pleasure. I'd given you a new name, Molly, and explained my lack of having a British accent by saying that you'd sent me to an American school throughout my

childhood. And my accent was almost perfectly American, with a teaspoon of foreignness, as one of my colleagues put it, an accomplishment I assigned to my American Peace Corp teachers in Katowice, a treat executed by your teaching connections, and an accent reduction class I'd taken at a New York language school.

Things were going well until one day after class one of my students, a Korean girl two years older than me, whose real name was Soun Yong but who'd requested to be called Alice, asked me about a word she saw in an online article which she couldn't find in her electronic dictionary. "What's *lineage*?" she asked, and I, embarrassed not to know, panicked and told her it was a technical name for something in geometry, the first thing that came to my mind. At home, I looked it up in a dictionary: "lineal descent from an ancestor." The next day I transferred Alice to another teacher, telling her that she would be better off in a more advanced class. You wouldn't have approved, of course.

The van made a sharp turn onto a narrow road. The rain was subsiding as rapidly as it'd intensified. An old Asian woman pushing a shopping cart was walking ahead, blocking the passage. The driver didn't honk; he followed the woman without any noticeable rebellion.

"Is she gonna move or what?" Jane said, blind to the surprised look the daughter and another passenger had given her.

I remembered another one of my students tell me that disrespecting the elderly was against their social code. When you wrote that grandfather had asked that I come home for grandmother's funeral, I sent him a note saying that I couldn't take a vacation. I pictured all of you gather around your mother's grave in Glubczyce, my two brothers with their wives and children, my father holding your hand, your father, his face slapped

by yet another loss, and you. I couldn't imagine the maudlin hellos and goodbyes and the inquisitive looks and most of all I couldn't imagine looking into your eyes and seeing the throbbing pain that would have accumulated there like the rain, ruthless and inescapable. None of my family had understood when I'd told them I was going to America as an au-pair and wanted to stay there forever; none of them, except for you, that is. The night before my flight, you walked into my room and watched me pack. I thought that you were going to hug me or cry, and in advance hated you for your sentimentalism. But you didn't. You stood by the door. "Come back when you're ready," you said. "I'm not coming back," I replied without looking at you, covering a teddy bear lying on top of the bed, alongside clothes and books waiting to be packed. I'd had this teddy bear since I was little—it was a gift from you—and wouldn't part with him, but the idea of you noticing my weakness filled me with shame. "I'm not coming back," I repeated, this time quieter, almost in a whisper. I then looked at you in passing, to check if you were close to tears. "I don't mean physically," you answered and smiled tenderly. It was the same smile as when, years back, assigned to write an essay about a person one admired most, I'd written about you and read it out to you before submitting it to the teacher, but back then in my room, that smile, a sign of acceptance and some profound understanding, annoyed me. And you opened the door and went back into the family world of screaming boys who were trying to be men and of a man who needed looking after as if her were a boy. This is how I would remember you: long blond hair loosely hanging on your neck and shoulders, making you look like a teenage girl; small face with a straight nose and round cheeks which lifted up every time you were excited or annoyed. A few wrinkles had already gotten hold of your neck and the area about your lips, but your beauty was not

compromised one bit. You wore an ankle-length red skirt with thick layers, the one you put on when father took you out dancing, but you were not going out that night. It was only after reading your recent letter, in which you casually mentioned that you didn't go dancing anymore due to "a minor medical condition," it was only then that I realized you'd worn the skirt for me, to celebrate my new life. Ever since my departure, you regularly wrote me long letters, detailing our family's laughter and tears, letters I didn't respond to but which I kept in a wooden TJ-Maxx box under my bed, abstaining from rereading them.

The woman with a shopping cart turned onto a path leading to a small yellowy-white house, and the driver gently stepped on the gas as the car kept rolling down the now empty road. Houses became sparse, giving way to open fields and a large sky, which brought to my mind the regular Sunday walks we'd taken as a family, you holding my hand and telling me stories about dancing dogs and books that laughed like people, stories that sprang from your head as naturally as the rain sprang from the sky.

"What!?" Jane's face was glued to the window behind which a gigantic brown building emerged, with stately columns in front, giving it a castle rather than a spa look. "The building was much bigger in the picture," she exclaimed. The van stopped, the driver jumped out and opened the door for the passengers. I noticed that no one tipped him.

Inside was a circular desk, its polish reflecting the golden ceiling. Young, attractive Korean women stood behind it, smiling like trained actresses—they'd already learnt the American way of doing customer service, I thought, and for a second would have liked you to be there, to see their smiles, to see a world different than the post-

Communist Poland in which the dyspeptic shop assistants looked at you like you weren't there unless you bought something for more than any of them could afford. Jane and I paid the thirty-dollar entry fee, and after Jane whispered into my ear that it was cheap. We were given plastic wristbands with numbers to be put on our wrists. "That's key to locker room," one of the receptionists said politely, skipping the articles, parts of speech that existed in neither Korean nor Polish.

The first locker was reserved for shoes only. I watched Jane swipe her wristband by one of the metal boxes, and did the same. I carefully arranged my boots inside, shut the small door, and immediately checked if it was locked. It was, after making a barely audible beeping sound. "It's so modern!" I exclaimed, but soon remembered that I'd supposedly spent my high school years in London, a city of multiple luxuries. "I mean, we have things like that in England too," I added, thinking about the time I got back from England, already a little too westernized to spend time with my old-fashioned mother.

Barefoot, we proceeded to the next stage. We were now in a spacious hallway with another reception desk filled with smiling Korean women. The tall palatial ceiling shined with impeccable whiteness, as did the white-wooden floors that I imagined being scrubbed and polished by a few young women from China or Vietnam.

"You wear this," said a woman whose face was heavily covered with make-up. She handed us orange T-shirts, shorts and towels. When she smiled, her blue eyelashes blinked quickly, reminding me of a cartoon character I'd seen while babysitting a five-year-old girl who cried every time I offered to read her a book. I used to love when you read to me, I thought and thanked the woman who was already blinking towards another

customer, this time a woman from her own continent. All Asians looked the same to me, and I hoped that Jane and I, both white, looked identical to them, too.

My locker, number 2346, opened as I swiped my wristband by it. This one was big and left enough room to leave all my belongings in it. Since I'd already had my bathing suit on, I decided to put the orange t-shirt and shorts over it. I used to be happy with my body, but had recently let myself go. Not much, a few kilos, or pounds, according to the Americans, in my hips and thighs. My stomach, over which I'd received many compliments from previous boyfriends, now had a slight curve to it, perhaps an act of rebellion against too much weight. There were weeks when I'd eat an entire chocolate bar per day, for the feeling of pleasure accompanying it; afterwards I'd feel sick and promise myself not to do it again. I had curly blond hair and light green eyes which, as you used to say, always jumped from one thing to the next. My complexion was delicate and pale, my unwelcome inheritance from you, although conveniently very English. I dreaded the summers in New York City because I turned red if I forgot to put on sunblock. I took off my black jeans and silver v-neck sweater, both new purchases from H&M and an outfit that suddenly seemed unsuitable for the occasion. Next to me Jane took off her cotton dress and tights, and a moment later she was stripped naked. I pretended not to notice it, and looked around to check whether my friend attracted other women's attention. To my surprise there were several other nude or half nude women, putting on the mandatory outfits or bathing suits.

"God, I wish they gave us something more normal to wear." Jane stood next to me, looking, for the first time, uncomfortable in her own body. The orange didn't complement her powdered face, I noticed. "Let's go to the saunas," she suggested,

pointing towards a sign in Korean and English, and headed straight ahead, without waiting for a response.

I walked behind her, looking around. I saw a few other white faces that looked Russian and the rest were all Asian women, in countless numbers, spread around the premises like ants. The orange outfits, at first ugly and too bright, gave me a feeling of anonymity, and I was glad I'd come, even if I had no chance of winning Jane over for myself.

We entered a salt sauna. The air was hot but not stuffy. Following the example of another woman, I lay on a thinly padded mat and closed my eyes. I wondered if Jane was doing the same, but I didn't want to check in case her eyes were open. I took a deep breath and the sea-like air flooded my chest like the homemade vodka grandmother had once given me when I had the flu. My body was warming up, and every time I felt adjusted to the temperature, the heat seemed to rise up, as if playing a game with me. I opened my eyes and glanced over at Jane, whose face, slightly blushed, looked pretty but not peaceful. I put my head back on the floor and tried a relaxation technique I'd read about in a Polish beauty magazine which I'd never buy myself but which was left at my apartment by a friend. The recipe said that one must imagine something utterly pleasant, like being on the beach with a lover or sitting in front of a fire on a cold winter day. I tried it. I pictured myself on a white sandy beach with emerald water, a tanned and handsome man whispering into my ear with a pure American accent, "I love you," but the image escaped me, was taken away by the ocean. Instead I saw my childhood, filled with laughter and carelessness. Despite the political unrest and limited selection of toys and food, I remembered it as a happy time, chasing after my two slightly younger brothers

who always told me to stay away but would eventually allow me into their games, you in an apron, your long blond hair tied back, cooking dinner, and my father, a store clerk with heavy set-eyes, reading a daily newspaper but glancing over at you from time to time, smiling. I chose America because I wanted a better life and knew from books and movies—and from you—that it was better. When you'd discovered you were pregnant with me, you were in the process of preparing papers to visit a distant aunt in Chicago, intending to stay in America. You burnt the American-stamped invitation letter and chose my father for the sake of a daughter that would be born seven months later. Of course, you'd never told me the story, not like this, but I managed to piece it together. At first, I didn't understand why you nicknamed me "*Ameryczka*," and when I finally did, I was too angry at you to thank you.

When I opened my eyes again, Jane wasn't there anymore. I left the sauna, the heat embracing me like a hug. Jane was leaning against the wall, her arms and neck shiny with sweat, which she was quickly drying with a towel. "Too hot," she said, not looking at me.

"Let's go to the next one," I responded, and for the first time I wasn't in the mood to talk to her, and I wanted to escape this unreasonable aversion, hoping it would go away.

When I entered the next sauna, hot steam overtook my body and I felt like I was flying. "I can't do this," Jane said and smiled widely but without showing her teeth as if she were in a pantomime. I pretended not to hear her and lay down on a pad. The heat seemed less hot now, and I imagined sitting on a couch between Leszek and Jurek and you in front of us, telling us how you'd met and fell in love with father. The sauna was

the blanket we sat under and the steam was your voice, soft and dreamy. I was perfectly warm, perfectly calm. So much that when I exited the room, I forgot about Jane and headed up the stairs, to the snack bar. I located a water fountain, filled up a plastic cup and drank greedily, soon ready for a refill. I sat down on a leather chair which resembled a lounge or beach chair, and looked around. Everyone was the same, as if the whole world blended into one. The only difference between people was that men wore blue and women wore orange. Most Asian women were skinny and petite, but it was difficult to tell who had a nice figure as the orange outfits were loose and the same size for all. Do you remember my school days when I had to wear a navy uniform? No one seemed to mind as a limited wardrobe was then preserved for special occasions, which made them more special. I wondered what you'd say if she saw my closet, filled with multiple copies of jeans and tops that looked identical except in a different color, with a button instead of a zipper.

“Oh, that felt good, if it wasn't for this woman next to me—she snorted like a pig!” Jane was looking down at me, also sipping water from a plastic cup. Her arms and legs were slightly reddened, giving her body a fresh look, like after a work-out. Her eyes wandered from left to right. “I'm dying for a snack,” she said and went up to a cafeteria. I slowly followed her, wondering if she'd made up the story about the snorting woman to make me think that she was, after all, capable of going to a sauna.

“But my wallet is in the locker room,” I said to her back, feeling ashamed that I hadn't brought any money with me.

“I'm sure they have some way of charging it to your account or something,” Jane answered and ordered a frozen yogurt with blueberries. The sales person, this time a

somber Korean man, asked her to swipe her wristband by a small device next to the register. “Told ya,” Jane looked at me with visible satisfaction, as if she’d just beaten someone in cards.

I ordered the same. We sat at a wooden table with dark green edges. Jane dipped her spoon into the yogurt and swallowed a big serving. “Ugh, this is weird. So sour.” She nonetheless spooned more out and put it into her mouth, making the face of a spoiled child who had been given the wrong kind of chocolate. She fixed her gaze at something behind me. “I bet some people come here to score,” she said, staring.

I looked ahead. There was a woman and a man sitting by a table, looking at each other with tenderness. They must have been in their early thirties, the woman, presumably Korean, had long black hair and black eyes which sparkled like jewels. She took a sip of water and passed it to the man.

“Yeah, probably,” I responded, trying to look in another direction. But there was something about the woman that attracted my attention, her gaze, alert and smiling, now pointed to her left. I followed that gaze and saw a little girl running into her arms. So she was a mother, I thought, suddenly shocked by the idea, as if being a mother was unusual or illegal. “I heard there is a bath place somewhere, with Jacuzzis and all that. Let’s find it,” I said, and this time I didn’t want Jane’s response. If that was the American way of doing things, I was on the right track. You would have said I was impolite.

We walked to the next floor, where a big sign read, “Women Only.” I stopped first. There was a naked woman standing in front of a large mirror, blow drying her hair. I looked at Jane whose eyes also widened. Soon another naked woman, presumably not a friend, assumed the same position in front of the mirror and began to brush her teeth. I

located the locker rooms—we were told that each floor had our own locker rooms—and proceeded towards my number. Just before the locker area, to my left, was a large glass window and a stream of naked women behind it, next to it, in front of it, as if some magic mirror had multiplied their reflections. The only naked body I ever saw in my life was yours, and suddenly there you were, transforming into all the Asian women.

“I’m not going naked, hell no,” Jane said, staring at the sight. “This is nuts. I’ll keep my bathing suit on,” she announced. Her voice was confident, but shaky underneath, as if someone held a knife to her throat.

“There’s a sign that says ‘no bathing suits’ on the door,” I calmly announced, unable to take my eyes off the naked women. I felt like I was in a movie or in a novel, the main character whose world is about to turn upside down, open up or close forever.

“I’m going back to the sauna then. This is disgusting,” Jane said, eyeing a small girl holding on to a woman’s leg and trying to lift her feet up, as if attempting to fly. As Jane spoke, she didn’t look at me; she looked away, at the wall, perhaps. “Come on.” She started walking back to the stairs.

I wanted to ask Jane why she didn’t mind exposing her body before, when she was putting on the orange outfit, but suddenly I understood. I took a step forward and froze. This is why I wanted to come to America, to live a different life. I knew it would split my world in two, but I hoped that eventually I would be able to join them together, my habit of taking my shoes off before entering an apartment with the freedom to walk out in sweatpants on a Sunday and remain anonymous. “I’m going in,” I said, my voice soft like a song.

Jane stopped and turned her head back. “What?” She still had beautiful long legs and spoke in a perfect American accent, but something had changed. Her brown eyes darkened like the woods at night, completely, and they shone through the trees. She reminded me of the stray dogs I saw in Katowice when people tried to pet them—their eyes signaled fear.

“I’ll see you later, Jane.” I left my friend with an easiness I hadn’t felt since I’d flown from Warsaw to New York City when everything was in front of me, a grand future on top of the sky scraped cloud. I now found my locker, and opened it. Inside was a white towel. I slowly took off my orange outfit and the bathing suit, perhaps waiting for someone to stop me. I placed them inside the box and, my waist wrapped in a towel, almost ran to the glass door, as if it was now or never.

It was now or never, or at least it felt like it, and inside it was hot and it smelled like antibacterial soap and heavy steam. There were showers on the right side of the room, and several women under a stream of water. The middle was all Jacuzzis, each one a different temperature. To the left was an area with small benches and mirrors in front of which sat Asian women scrubbing their bodies with a sponge. Next to each one was a picnic basket filled with cosmetics. The women worked busily as if cleaning their bodies to perfection were the ultimate goal of existence. I imagined their dead skin falling away, like a snake’s, and thought I must tell you about it, forgetting for a moment that I hadn’t said a word to you in years.

I dipped my foot in the first Jacuzzi, and quickly slipped myself into the water. The temperature was warm but not steaming, and the bubbles gently massaged my back and my feet. There were two other women in the pool, with their eyes closed, clearly

enjoying the sensation. I wanted to close my eyes, but first I had to look at the nakedness, at the Eves who never discovered the connection between nudity and sex, a phenomenon in the XXI century. And yet here they were, small bodies with narrow hips, like a man's, tall, long-legged bodies with thick buttocks and small breasts, or the other way around, and full-bodied ones, with layers of fat dancing up and down as they walked; white, yellow, even two black people and some in between; young and old, with muscles, wrinkles, cellulite, or others without any. They were the first and the last women in the world, they were beautiful in body and mind, they were who they were and not anyone else. I looked ahead and fixed my eyes on a large-boned woman standing on the other side of the Jacuzzi like a statue. She was blond, with a few gray hairs showing in her ponytail. She had large blue eyes and red cheeks, which were probably a result of the heat but which made her look like she was blushing. She had beautiful breasts, small and disproportionate to the rest of her body, but lean, like you. Her skin was shiny and wrinkled, and her thighs looked strong and thick, also like yours. When I was little, on Sunday evenings, after dinner, we'd take a bath, you and I. It was our ritual during which you'd embrace me with your body and pretend that I disappeared under the water, and later we'd talk a jargon that only a mother and daughter would understand. I now imagined us in the bathtub, me talking prattle and you listening and laughing, and I had a trembling desire for the water to engulf me, like you used to do. For the first time in years the thought of you didn't make me want to kill it right away, and I kept looking at the woman. Her light complexion and gentle facial features classified her as a Slav, and I knew she was Russian when I heard her say "*Dotch.*" "*Dotch,*" she said and smiled as a teenage girl, who was a younger version of herself, grabbed her hand. They walked into

the Jacuzzi, smiled at each other, and, holding hands, dipped into the water. As they reemerged, their faces dripping, the mother stood up and did something unusual: she petted the water and, touching her daughter's head and back, she gently forced her to lie down. It crossed my mind that Jane would deem the scene disgusting, but suddenly Jane was irrelevant, like a wool sweater on a hot summer day, and there was the Russian mother, holding her grown-up daughter like a baby and rocking her from left to right, from left to right, with a smile on her face that traveled beyond her face; and the daughter, her eyes closed, also smiling, a smile of security and bliss on her young face not yet poisoned by a desire to break away from the woman who'd given her life. I emerged from the water and strolled to the next Jacuzzi. I dipped my foot in—the water was much warmer than the last one—but didn't immediately go all the way in. Instead, I closed my eyes and enjoyed the gentle cascade of bubbles tickle my toes with a slight burning sensation as my body, soft as a baby's and stripped of the thick layers of my brand new H&M clothing, longed to touch your classically ornamented handwriting, your letters forgiving me for the long silence, with love.