

I

Otto,

the letter began, in blue ink.

*I've gone. I've never seen the water, so I've gone there. Don't worry,
I've left you the truck. I can walk. I will try to remember to come back.*

*Yours (always),
Etta.*

Underneath the letter she had left a pile of recipe cards. All the things she had always made. Also in blue ink. So he would know what and how to eat while she was away. Otto sat down at the table and arranged them so no two were overlapping. Columns and rows. He thought about putting on his coat and shoes and going out to try and find her, maybe asking neighbours if they had seen which way she went, but he didn't. He just sat at the table with the letter and the cards. His hands trembled. He laid one on top of the other to calm them.

After a while Otto stood and went to get their globe. It had a light in the middle, on the inside, that shone through the latitude and longitude lines. He turned it on and turned off the regular kitchen lights. He put it on the far side of the table, away from the letter and cards, and traced a path with his finger. Halifax. If she went east, Etta would have 3,232 kilometres to cross. If west, to Vancouver, 1,201 kilometres. But she would go east, Otto knew. He could feel the tightness in the skin across his chest pulling that way. He noticed his rifle was missing from the front closet. It would still be an hour or so until the sun rose.

Growing up, Otto had fourteen brothers and sisters. Fifteen altogether, including him. This was when the flu came and wouldn't go, and the soil was even drier than usual, and the banks had all turned inside out and all the farmers' wives were losing more children than they were keeping. So families were trying and trying, for every five pregnancies, three babies, and for every three babies, one child. Most of the farmers' wives were pregnant most of the time. The silhouette of a beautiful woman, then, was a silhouette rounded with potential. Otto's mother was no different. Beautiful. Always round.

Still, the other farmers and their wives were wary of her. She was cursed, or blessed; *supernatural*, they said to one another across mailboxes. Because Otto's mother, Grace, lost none of her children. Not one. Every robust pregnancy running smoothly into a ruddy infant and every infant to a barrel-eared child, lined up between siblings in grey and off-grey nightclothes, some holding babies, some holding hands, leaning into the door to their parents' room, listening fixedly to the moaning from within.



Etta, on the other hand, had only one sister. Alma with the pitch-black hair. They lived in town.

Let's play nuns, said Etta, once, after school but before dinner.

Why nuns? said Alma. She was braiding Etta's hair. Etta's just-normal like a cowpat hair.

Etta thought about the nuns they saw, sometimes, on the edges of town, moving ghostly-holy between the shops and church. Sometimes by the hospital. Always clean in black and white. She looked down at her own red shoes. Blue buckles. Undone. Because they're beautiful, she said.

No, Etta, said Alma, nuns don't get to be beautiful. Or have adventures. Everybody forgets nuns.

I don't, said Etta.

Anyway, said Alma, I might get married. And you might too.

No, said Etta.

Maybe, said Alma. She leaned down and did up her sister's shoe. And, she said, what about adventures?

You have those before you become a nun.

And then you have to stop? asked Alma.

And then you get to stop.