

LAURIE KRUK

## my mother did not tell stories

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My mother did not tell stories—  
instead, passed around our sticky kitchen table  
warnings, worries, laments, teatime croonings,  
that diluted childhood, muted its paintbox primary  
with shadings and greys from the dark pages  
of adult discouragement. *Being a man is hard work—  
don't ask your brother to dry the dishes.*

Or, *My father never wanted us—the CCF took up his whole heart.*  
About Grandma Elsie, dead when I closed the first circle of seasons,  
*My mother kept running away, but her Irish relations could only afford  
to send her home. To "your husband." I was never so happy  
as when they called after me, in Belfast, "Hey Canada!" Felt like a comic-book heroine,  
my tits turned pointy as maple leaves.*

Our growing-up years  
were not nourished by stories built around survival,  
but hard crusts left over from times of stubbornness,  
just enough to start a life on. Charlie and Elsie's bitter marital loaf  
the proverbs of worry nibbled by my mother, sister, five grandkids.  
Like a photo of Charlie's White Rose Gas Station, forties, Windsor,  
where they all  
slept in the back room, wearing the reek  
of engine oil, spilled gasoline  
like a caste mark.

Selling out, Charlie went on the Line at Chrysler.  
 Working overtime at the Top Hat Grill, Elsie became radiantly tragic  
 hoping each night to be taken away  
 by a sensitive post-war millionaire, won by her smile  
 and careful way placing the coffee cups,  
 not a drop lost. Later, when my mother was engaged,  
*Elsie's rocking chair blessing: Men have all the power, but  
 they don't know it, unless we let them. Don't let him.* Cradling her saucer  
 of cold tea  
 like a still-born. Five years later, ballooned by the illness gnawing  
 at her bowels, Elsie floated over the Atlantic in morphine dreams, before  
 the landlady phoned  
 and they carried her back, terminally in arrears. Murmuring to the V.O.N.  
*Mother, Mother—may I please come home, now?*

My father did not tell stories:  
 Baba's memories, half-buried in Russian,  
 were too radioactive to unearth, like Chernobyl's ashy soil,  
 not far from where he was born. Too much old world pain waved away—  
 dysentery, orphans, typhus,  
 greedy landlords, rotten potatoes, stolen land, emigration—  
 why drag it over the ocean?  
 So she muttered, half in English  
 and he would nod, sinking in his chair, retired teacher  
 recalling the mining town he was raised in, the ungentle man they left behind  
 for a new start in the border city, new father, school for Nick in Detroit:  
 subsiding into silence after two helpings of her cherry pie.  
 Along with ten dollar bills, folded into our sticky palms like crushed moths  
 Baba provided these free lessons:

*Don't trust no-bahdee.  
 Look after yu-self.  
 Keep yur kitchen clean,  
 Yu money inside an old shoe.  
 Men, yu don't need.  
 Die, yu owe nuthin to no-bahdee.*

Although Baba lived to one hundred, burying three husbands,  
her triumph never quite equaled the loss—  
moving, marrying, leaving, forgetting, burying—  
the stories were lost to her rocking-chair's rhythm, grooves  
worn into the floor while we waited  
to turn on the TV, or escape to boys with cars. Only when we were waving  
good-bye, from the parking lot of the Home  
to her balcony watch  
did the old words suddenly flow  
from her lips: curses or thanks,  
we'll never know.