

LAURIE KRUK

my mother did not tell stories

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.