

WISNIEWSKA

There was a girl who slipped out her bedroom window one night and disappeared—wisp of a thing, not yet sixteen—simply *not there* when morning came. Her parents searched for her for months, night after night, in that city of thugs and whistlers, back alleys and vacant lots, cruising along the tracks that ran past the mill that never shut down until, finally, they gave her up for dead. They had ten other kids to keep fed, after all, and a numbers book to run. Their missing girl just another missing girl the cops said would never be found. (Here's where the fairy tale goes dark, two years passing without a word.) Then one day the kitchen screen door clicking softly open and closed. And standing there a young woman no one recognized at first. Her mother screamed and turned her back, as if she'd seen a ghost. Her father let out his breath, at last. (Here's where the light slips in again.) This wasn't the daughter who'd disappeared but someone like her enough to love—only leggier, less innocent, more stubborn and secretive. And because she refused to say where she'd been—had just appeared again, *out of the blue*—a pact was made among her kin not to ask, so that she'd stay. I only heard this story after my mother had died, when no one could explain to me, or themselves, why she'd run away, where she'd gone, or what had made her come home. It was a secret she took to her grave. How the girl the nuns had called *Wisniewska* [Veesh-nev-ska], *stick out your hand*, then the slap of the ruler coming down—how the girl who'd danced for nickels, who'd scavenged cigarette butts from the gutter for *Dziadzia* to smoke—became the woman I knew as a child, wiping my filthy face with a clean rag, humming *the beautiful Tennessee Waltz*.