Fall has settled in the mountains, their fissured backs patched with colors—pumpkin orange, amber yellow, cranberry red. Shades upon shades of green. From the distance, it seems as though the mountains have been draped with quilts, shielded from rain and impending cold, the weather. It won’t snow for a while, and when it does, the mountains will appear taller and wider, but also farther away. Irene finds them enduring yet vulnerable, and so heartbreakingly female. She and John used to argue about it. He would say: warriors in stone armor, knights, crusaders, guards. And she would say: wombs, earth bearers, mothers, wives, girlfriends.

On the dining room table, Irene has emptied two large tin boxes of old buttons gathered over the years—a life’s worth of buttons. She recognizes some of them, others she swears she’s never seen or held before. Irene can’t bring herself to clear them off the table. Somehow, the sight appeases her, fills her days with substance, and even provides odd moments of pleasure. She loves slipping her hands through heaps of cool, manifold plastic, or stacking up the buttons like coins. She may gather fists full of buttons and watch them fall through her
fingers, or sit still and gaze for hours, trying to discern something small, something insignificant—a quiver perhaps, an oscillation, a wavering of sorts.

When the phone rings, Irene has just spotted a knot of a button she assumes is hers. It’s brown-green, woven, thick, pointy, almost like a small cone or a berry. She twiddles it in her fingers as she walks to the kitchen and picks up the receiver.

Irene is pretty sure she doesn’t know the caller, but the caller knows her or rather her name, which is listed as the emergency contact for one of their patients, Ms. Vera Rudskaya. Although the name is mispronounced and then pronounced again, this time a bit faster and clearer, Irene experiences a slight trepidation in her chest and arms and nearly loses the button on the floor. The voice is telling Irene that Ms. Rudskaya is a cancer patient at John Hopkins, and that she’s undergone a serious surgery; soon she’ll have to take chemo treatments and possibly radiation. The doctor thinks much will depend on the post-operative care and the family. And since there doesn’t seem to be any—just Irene—the nurse has been asked to contact her.

Irene feels compelled to say something at once, but finds it impossible, her vocal cords constricted.

“Hello?” the voice says, calm yet urgent. “Is there any way you can come to the hospital? Any way at all? How far do you live?”

Again, Irene finds it impossible to answer. How far is far? she wants to ask. Are we talking miles or hours? Days or years? Forward or backwards? How far can she really go? The nurse is following orders, but Irene, of course, is under no obligation to come or do anything else—the patient doesn’t expect any visitors.

It takes Irene less than an hour to pack for an overnight trip—she could never stay longer—and she’s on the road by 8 a.m. the next morning. She has no animals to worry about and her plants won’t need watering for a week, as cool and damp as her house stays. Her refrigerator contains very little food since she dines out every night, usually at Bistro on Main, at the table by the window facing McCampbell Inn, where eight years ago she’d gone to have an affair.
The Bistro is always crowded; many students eat there, young women who haven’t really known failure, blooming with optimism. Irene can’t help but listen to their insouciant, often inept, conversations and marvel at their youth. Not so much their age, but the excitement of all things possible, still ahead.

Last night, at the neighboring table, a few girls ordered scallops, and Irene heard the waiter claim they’d been delivered fresh that morning from Maryland, which was when Irene decided to make the trip. It will take her approximately five hours to drive from Lexington to Baltimore with stops and traffic, but she’s in no hurry either; she might even spend an afternoon in D.C. browsing through the Smithsonian. She’s heard there’s an ancient rug expo in one of the pavilions.

Vera arrived at their home in Virginia on a sweltering, dusty August day in 1991, making Irene think of Russian steppe, miles and miles of uninterrupted grassland. She carried nothing but an old trunk of a sturdy, painted-brown cardboard held together by two leather belts. Her name was printed in white across the front. Vera was a scrawny teenager with short dandelion hair and dark eyes, the color of loam. Not so much a pretty face, but a pert one. She was dressed in black leggings and a satin turquoise-blue tunic cinched around her waist with a wide black belt. A flat silver cross dangled on her neck. She appeared considerably smaller in frame than Irene’s children, Mike and Zoe, and immeasurably older, even though all three were the same age, not quite eighteen. John taught history at Washington & Lee and thought it to be a marvelous opportunity to host a student from the former Soviet Union. “Just think what she knows, what she can share,” he told Irene. Irene shrugged, but did agree that perhaps it would be interesting, if not beneficial, for her children to live and socialize with someone from that other, darker and much forbidden, part of the world.

In her trunk, Vera had very few personal belongings: a dictionary, two pairs of underwear, socks, a toothbrush, and an oversized T-shirt she later gave to Mike. The rest of the space was taken up by an Oriental rug, folded and sewn inside a sheet.

“To you. Gift. From home,” she’d said, hefting the rug with as much effort as her slender arms allowed. Irene couldn’t help but reach for it and then drag it to the living room, where John ripped the sheet open with a knife.
The rug was large and frayed around the edges, the colors faded into the richness of hues glowing in the afternoon sun. It had ornaments of leaves and vines and blossoming flowers with curlicues of different lengths and thicknesses. The rug gave the room an inviting, homely look, lying like patches of dyed wool on the hardwood floor. They ended up keeping it there, replacing the one they’d bought at an outlet years ago and that seemed cheap and crude next to its Russian contender.

Vera spoke decent English and laughed freely, with a child’s ease and explosiveness, sometimes at things or situations Irene perceived less than funny. She had a heavy accent John found exotic, but Irene deemed harsh, irreparable. There was a feeling of distinction about her, however, in her manners and the way she said, asserted things, commanding the room to her attention. The day Vera had arrived, she’d asked for chores, so she could earn some pocket money to buy burgers, coke, and Marlboros—the three things American. She also asked for old clothes, anything they could spare, until she could find a job that paid cash because with her student visa, she wasn’t allowed to work, just study and experience the culture.

Irene didn’t know what to make of the girl, who was so unlike her own children, so independent, mature, assiduous, self-sufficient. During the eleven months Vera was staying with them, Irene had never heard her say ‘no’ to anything: food or clothes or errands or homework, or any of the family activities Mike and Zoe spurned as boring or ridiculous. Vera welcomed picnics, hiking, biking, fly-fishing, cooking, cleaning, washing dishes or doing laundry, and Irene often wondered who the girl’s parents were and how they’d managed to raise her that way. Were deprivation and a totalitarian regime the key to successful parenting? Was everything they’d been told about the Communist aggression wrong? Was America really a better place? Irene wondered and even shared her concerns with John, who laughed and then asked, “What are you saying? That you want our children to go and live there? Among all those zombies?” And she said, “Vera isn’t a zombie. She’s so alive, I almost feel dead next to her.”

And that’s when things started to change—Irene knows it now—when she began feeling dead, uninspired by her home, her surroundings, her own children. The lack of vigor in her life, and even purpose, some larger, unattainable truth one was supposed to discover at midlife, something that was meant to prepare you for old age, to carry you through all the heartbreaks
and disappointments, grave illnesses, the inescapability of death. Irene felt deprived. She possessed no such knowledge, no such truth, a realization that somehow became more prominent, more astute when Vera was living with them. Irene grew restless, mostly because she couldn’t share her thoughts with anyone, and because they were just that—thoughts—random, incoherent, a skein of speculations she toiled to understand herself. If her life was a dream, Irene would’ve never questioned her actions; they would’ve seemed logical and necessary, even with no beginning and no end, just the middle, the prolonged continuous tense—her running someplace, chasing someone, searching for her children, her husband, saving a kitten or putting out a fire, filling her pockets with beach sand.

By now, Irene has already passed D.C. The traffic is merciful, and Irene hasn’t stopped but once to use a restroom and get coffee, which she leaves unfinished in her cup.

Twelve years ago, when John was first diagnosed with Type B aortic dissection, they both quit drinking alcohol or coffee and tried to adhere to vegetarian diets, with an exception of one burger on Sunday. They bought their produce from a local co-op, and in the summer Irene even tried to grow a vegetable garden. It turned out their backyard was mostly clay, so she carried bags and bags of potting soil mixed with a fertilizer. Irene was never a petite woman; she was tall and big-boned, with the sturdiness to her hips that had gotten wider and heavier after the birth of her children. Her weight not so much a burden to her, but an asset. She had a cloud of hair, shoulder-length, so curly and stubborn and all gray. She wore no makeup and no sunscreen, just a moisturizer, her face smooth and tanned. She had large feet and hands, and her arms were long, robust, delineated with muscles. She dressed in loose skirts year around and favored calm, earthy tones—greens and browns, an occasional russet, never red. Irene worked in the garden all summer, tending to the vegetables the best she could, but except for a few cucumbers and a bushel of tomatoes, nothing else took. Her carrots were pitiful, her eggplant refused to turn purple like its picture on the seedlings cartons, and her peppers and zucchinis were malnourished dwarfs compared to the healthy, taut ones she bought at the market.

After John’s exigent surgery five years ago, when the damaged area of the aorta was replaced with an artificial graft, Irene decided to plant an apple orchard because she’d heard
all her life that apples were a poor man’s medicine. Not that she and John were poor, but they were contemplating retirement. Their children had long gotten their degrees and respective jobs and lived on their own; neither was married or had offspring. At seventy, John still taught part-time at W & L and Irene, being ten years his junior, continued to work as a teller in a local BB&T. By then, the whole family got together only once a year, for Thanksgiving or Christmas, although since John’s illness, the children did call more often.

Their property to the side of the house, or rather a large, abandoned, brush-ridden lot, which they’d bought separately, a few years after they’d moved in, hoping to put in a pool or a pond, allowed seven trees spaced eighteen feet apart. When she finally picked out seven varieties—Yellow Transparent, Lyman’s Large Summer, Liberty, Freedom, Virginia’s Beauty, Victoria Limbertwig, and Granny Smith—Irene had taken into consideration several factors. The ripening time was important, pollination if a tree was not a self-fruitful variety, and climate; Irene had to make sure all the trees would withstand scorching summer heat, as well as occasional winter blizzards.

The trees’ resistance to diseases was one of the determining factors too. Apple scab, for example, manifested itself in black fungal lesions on the surface of leaves, buds, or fruits and underwent sexual reproduction in the leaf litter around the base of the tree over winter, producing a new generation of ascospores the following spring. But the disease rarely killed its host, although caused significant damage, reducing fruit yields and quality. Fire blight, however, was often transmitted by honeybees, birds, rain, and wind, and under optimal conditions was capable of destroying an entire orchard in a single growing season.

Irene chose to plant three-year-old semi-dwarfs because they were easier to manage and they could produce fruit earlier than standard-size trees. However, since apple cultivars are usually grafted onto different rootstocks, some of the trees could still have poor root anchorage and require additional support. From various on-line sources Irene had gathered the following facts: grafting is the practice of attaching of one plant to another in such a way that the two pieces bond and become one plant; the plant selected for its roots is called the stock, the other selected for its stems, flowers, leaves, or fruits is called the scion; there’s a thin layer of tissue sandwiched between the bark of the tree and the wood known as the cambium layer; it’s comparable to the circulatory system in a human’s body and responsible for transferring water and nutrients from the roots to the top of the plant and vice versa;
when grafting, it’s extremely important to bond the cambium layer of the stock to the cambium layer of the scion; it’s also important not to cut too deeply, and into the wood; both tissues must be kept alive until the graft has taken; joints formed by grafting aren’t as strong as naturally formed joints, so a physically weak point often occurs at the graft.

Generally, an apple tree could start bearing fruit in four to five years, but some could try after just a year or two. In that case, Irene was told by a young farmer she’d hired to help her plant the orchard, she must clip off all the buds. Because fruit production requires so much energy, a young tree might be easily stunted by it, its root system weakened.

Now, in late October, most of the apples are on the ground, except for the Granny Smith. Irene doesn’t know what to do with all the apples, and her children live too far away to worry about picking them. So Irene takes her apples to the co-op, bags full, and leaves them by the door.

In Baltimore, Irene doesn’t go to the hospital right away, but decides to eat lunch at one of the restaurants overlooking the harbor. It has transformed greatly in twenty years—the shopping, the dining, new hotels and businesses—all that glass and steel, reflecting, corrugating in the water. The day is warm and sunny, and Irene chooses to sit outside, gazing at the magnificent ships docked all around, and then at the way the water oscillates, pinpricks of light on its dark, silky surface. There’s a bit of a breeze coming from the harbor, and Irene wishes she hasn’t left her jacket in the car. She orders a crab-cake sandwich and a small salad, dressing on the side. And also tea—hot tea, she corrects the waitress.

Somewhere, not too far away, a tour guide is gathering a group of people to sightsee in the city and visit Poe’s grave. The man holds the writer’s portrait high above his head. Irene cannot see the face on the portrait in great detail but knows it to be weary and sad, with feverish eyes, sharp jawline, and black moustache over the thin, pencil-etched lips. She remembers memorizing a portion of “The Raven” in high school though cannot recall a single line, just some words and the mood, so somber, so cumbersome, the strike of a hammer in each nevermore. She says, “Nepenthe,” out loud. And then again. She has no idea what it means.
Day by day, word by word, Irene watched her children grow to adore Vera and revere her opinions. They ate everything she ate, including beets and cabbage and raw onion, and even chicken liver Irene had to procure and fry. Her children wandered outside barefoot, even on the coldest of days, and took rain baths, guffawing in the yard, drenched to the last hair. They even started reading those heavy Russian novels Irene could never bring herself to check out of the library and mimicked Vera’s facial expressions and also her speech, acquiring some sort of an accent, which sounded unbearable to Irene’s ear.

To celebrate Memorial Day, the family had decided to spend a long weekend at the beach. Mike, Zoe, and Vera clamored in the back seat while John drove and Irene marveled at the Francis Scott Key Bridge they were crossing. It was like crossing into the future, into the unknown, water all around them. Irene felt liquid herself, unmoored, flowing in the directions of great ships and a few smaller boats buoyed in the distance. Oddly enough, she succumbed to peace when they traveled. Or perhaps, it was all the distraction, the complete and utter abandonment of everyday duties, of the nagging realization that somehow her life was exactly what she’d wanted it to be and yet not what she desired.

John and the children seemed to have enjoyed the beach, basking in the sun and even swimming, as cold as the water was, but Irene had trouble relaxing or falling asleep. One night she stood on the deck of their rented house, picking up a pack of Marlboros and a lighter Vera had forgotten on the lounge chair. She lit a cigarette and took a few drags, her college days suddenly in her mouth, all the random night-long fests, cold stringy pizzas, unlimited booze. There had been sex too—nervous, sweaty, immature, often interrupted, but free. Free from everything but the pleasure it offered. The ocean crashed in the distance, the water black like oil. A tusk of a moon above. On her way to bed, Irene was passing the girls’ room when she stopped, halted in the dark. The door was not shut tight and she touched it, barely, pressed her fingers to its slick surface. Even before she’d stepped into the room, she became aware of things, fleshy things, things that mingled, grew, bred in her home, under her motherly gaze, things she’d allowed her children to do, to be a part of. As she tiptoed in the room, her eyes adjusting to its conspiratorial darkness, she saw all three spooning on the floor—Zoe inside Vera inside Mike. It was hot and damp in the room, the window opened, the shutters raised. The air salty, sticky, grains of sand under Irene’s bare feet. She stood, not moving, her
eyes isolating the pieces of underwear—a cami, a pair of briefs—next to the bed. Under a white sheet rolled down to their hips, her children were naked, as they had been inside her, their skin pale and silky, a soft curl to their brown hair. In the middle, Vera was tan and blond, glowing like a lantern.

“They were just sleeping,” John assured Irene the next morning. “Naked? Naked?” she asked.

At the hospital, at the Kimmel Cancer Center, Irene learns the following: Ms. Vera Rudskaya has stage II lung cancer; a thoracotomy was performed two days ago and the affected section of the lung was removed, along with the lymph nodes; the patient has a chest tube to allow the fluid to drain; the cancer hasn’t spread to other organs; she will begin external radiation as soon as she has healed from the surgery; the radiation will have to be five days a week for three weeks; it may harm the esophagus, causing problems with swallowing; the radiation will most likely be given together with chemotherapy for a more aggressive treatment.

Irene has a stack of medical brochures huddled against her chest; in her other hand she holds a large tote filled with apples. The center is impressive and accommodating, and has all the standard smells: chlorine, sanitizing alcohol, reheated cafeteria food. Irene imagines Vera asking for borsht or pelimeni, the large sickle-shaped Siberian dumplings she made for them on Thanksgiving. Vera has just been moved from an IC unit on the third floor to an inpatient private room on the fourth, and Irene lingers in the hallway before pushing the door open with just the tips of her fingers.

Once in the room, Irene is extremely quiet and also careful, so as not to wake the patient, whom she cannot recognize, no matter how long and hard she stares. On the bed, inside a cocoon of sheets and hoses, tiny poking tubes, lies a middle-aged woman, gaunt and pallid, a wax figure with graying hair and skin like dead leaves. At first, Irene thinks there has been a mistake, and somehow this woman, whom Irene doesn’t know, got her name confused. She thinks she did all that travelling for a stranger, for someone who perhaps is also alone, like Irene.

“I knew you’d come.”
“Me?” Irene asks, startled. She’s amazed at how much softer Vera’s accent has gotten, but also how dry her voice sounds as though short of vowels. She wonders how much air she’s able to draw into her pared lungs. “I didn’t know where to come,” Irene says, apologetically. Vera’s eyes are directed at her, and Irene notes them to be much darker, almost black.

“Here’re some apples,” Irene says and fetches a few out of the bag. “I grew them. They are quite good. I give a lot of them away.” She regrets she said that. She doesn’t want Vera to think she brought the apples because she needed to dispose of them.

“Thank you.”

Irene unloads the apples on the tray table, so conveniently tall, on wheels. Now the room smells like her orchard on a warm windless day.

“What kind are they?” Vera asks, whispers now.

“Freedom, Virginia Beauty, and this is Victoria Limbertwig,” Irene says, pointing at a gorgeous fruit of purple color. “It’ll keep all winter.” Picking up the brochures from the table, Irene stows them inside the empty tote.

“You leaving?” Vera’s cheeks are a bit flushed, perhaps from the effort. Irene knows she must not talk; both of them must not talk.

“I’m staying the night,” she says. “I’ll come back tomorrow. You need to rest.”

“Which hotel?”

Irene shrugs. “I haven’t booked one yet. But I saw plenty around the hospital. Lots of sick people here.” Again, she regrets she said that. She wishes they could just use telepathy, like aliens, transporting their thoughts silently through their eyes, or dipping in and out of each other’s minds, retrieving all the pertinent information, a scoop of years, the lacking episodes.

“Stay my place. Not far. Stay as long—” Vera wheezes and attempts to cough, and Irene rushes out to get a nurse.

Irene has Vera’s address copied from her driver’s license onto a piece of paper, Vera’s keys in her purse. In the lobby, at the info desk, Irene was able to obtain a city map and jot down a maze of directions. Perhaps, she should’ve stayed at the hotel, and she still can, but she
will at least take a peep at the place. She feels brazen, alone in the city, doing something spontaneous and inane, something John would have disapproved of. Some days, she’s replete with sentiment and longs to talk to him, so she calls his cell, which she keeps charged and turned on at the house. She listens to a short greeting message, his old crackle of a voice, followed by a sharp beep, and then she says things into the receiver, silly things, trifles really, like how windy it has gotten and cold, how she should’ve worn a heavier jacket and made hot cider to drink on the road, how gorgeous the leaves are, flying at her in great sweeps, throwing themselves against the windshield. Now she also tells him about Vera and that she is going to stay at her apartment overnight and perhaps dust it a bit for when she comes back from the hospital, although it looks like it may be a while. She wants to add that she forgives him and that he must forgive her too. All it was—a visit, a trip to a hotel room, an unresponsive touch of unfamiliar flesh, a chain of mountain ridges curving black against the dusk-red horizon.

Irene is surprised at how easily she’s able to locate the street and the apartment complex and the apartment itself, on the eighth floor above the parking garage. Irene wonders how much it costs to rent such a place in the heart of the city. Surely, Vera doesn’t own it. The apartment is small though, with a narrow strip of a hallway that leads to the kitchen and the living area combined. There’s a balcony partially overlooking a brick-paved courtyard, with a wrought-iron bistro set and a clay flower pot in the middle. When Irene steps out and peers inside it, she discovers several half-smoked cigarettes crushed at the bottom. The city booms down below, indefatigable, people scurrying places, the streets clogged with afternoon traffic. She imagines Vera sitting here at night, alone, smoking her Marlboros, squinting at the street lights, their blurry reflections in the dark office windows.

Vera’s apartment is clean, much cleaner than Irene’s house, which she’s been neglecting in the past months, confining things to piles and stacks on the floor—magazines, newspapers, clothes, empty grocery bags, socks and shoes. The apartment has very little furniture, new hardwood floors, and only one bedroom and one bed. Irene hasn’t accounted for that. She inspects the living-room sofa and is disappointed to learn that it doesn’t unfold. The kitchen cabinets contain almost no dishes but some food: tea varieties, honey, cubes of brown sugar in a bowl, a handful of shelled walnuts in a Ziploc bag, sea salt, dry lentils, wild rice, organic pasta, a full bottle of sunflower oil, and oatmeal. In the refrigerator, Irene finds nothing except for fish oil capsules and probiotics, soft ice packs in the freezer.
Irene opens a dishwasher and begins to transfer the cleaned dried dishes and cups to the cabinets, placing them anywhere there’s room.

Mike and Zoe dismissed Irene’s questions about that night on the beach, brushed off her worries like bread crumbs from the dinner table. They just shrugged and made puzzled faces and even suggested that Irene had imagined things, dreamed them up.

Then Irene’s mother fell and broke her hip, right after the children’s graduation, and Irene drove to Ohio to help her father. When she returned, however, ten days later, her house, her husband, and even her children felt foreign to her. Try as she might, she couldn’t find the cause of her unrest. Everything was in its place, exactly the way she’d left it. And yet things had shifted, acquired a strange inimical light, a concealed meaning. The dishes had been returned to the china cabinet, the cups and glasses to the cupboard, the silverware gleamed in the drawer. But Irene couldn’t bring herself to touch any of it. Everyone seemed happy to see her, but then John asked if she would have to travel back soon. Mike and Zoe would be leaving for college, but Vera was offered a year of study at W & L; she could take over the housekeeping, at least for the summer. In her bedroom, even before Irene undressed or unpacked, she began pulling the covers and sheets off the bed, tossing them in a pile, which rose like a snowdrift on the floor.

After inspecting the master closet, the contents of Vera’s drawers, and the bathroom cabinet, Irene has deduced the following: Vera is not married, and even if she was once, it was a long time ago; she doesn’t seem to have any children either; she works in an office, judging by all the gray pant suits; she doesn’t waste money on expensive shoes and prefers cotton underwear and wireless bras; she isn’t anywhere near menopause unlike Irene, who stopped menstruating right at forty. Also: Vera reads a lot and she misses home. Three full bookcases are lined against the wall, mostly novels, some poetry. Russian souvenirs clutter each shelf, as well as the TV cabinet, the dresser, and both nightstands. Irene fingers travel from a set of nesting dolls to the amber animals to a beautiful jewelry box carved out of a tree bark—birch, she assumes. Irene pulls off the lid and contemplates Vera’s old silver cross, thin and delicate,
with curving edges, like a blossom of a dogwood tree. Irene takes the cross out and holds it on her palm, then tries to fashion it around her neck, fidgeting with the clasp. She unbuttons her shirt in front of the mirror and touches her hand to the cross, too small, too humble on her age-mottled chest.

Irene longs to call her children, to tell them: I’ve found her. Come back, come back home.

Vera left, vanished from their house, the morning after Irene’s return from Ohio, the trunk gone from under the bed. Irene and John reported to the school’s International Student Council and the program coordinator, but remained brief in their statements. There was no mention of the fight between the spouses the previous night, or of the children’s infatuation with their Russian guest, or of any suspicious behavior that could’ve led to the girl’s disappearance. No one blamed Irene, but no one paid much attention to her either, disregarding her genuine worries, her attentiveness in the matter. And even though she’d wanted the girl to leave, she didn’t mean for her to disappear. Irene felt disconcerted at first, and then guilty, and then distressed. She imagined Vera vagabonding about the world, trunk in hand, buming rides, sleeping in trailer parks, strange cars, or mice-crawling basements. She imagined the girl locked in a filthy house or kept in a tent in a backyard, a covey of babies by her side.

Mike and Zoe bristled up against Irene and gradually stopped communicating with her or John altogether, holed up in their rooms, locks turned, music blaring. They grew polite and aloof and switched to the farthest of colleges, the remotest of places. They almost never called, and she and John saw them less and less. Each time they visited, Irene wanted to take them in her arms and say: I’m sorry. I was protecting my home, my family. When you have your own children, you’ll understand, know, and perhaps forgive. But she didn’t say it, and they didn’t come to her, didn’t let her offer any explanations, mend the way.

After the children had moved, Irene and John were suddenly confronted with age and time—years’ worth of time—all that togetherness so insufferably drawn out, augmented by the empty house. There was no urgency and no fear, but silent contemplation of life in passing. They tried going on trips, but that, too, brought no relief and even deepened the discontent, their marriage too old, too desperate—a boat left in the open, beaten to smithereens. And
then John fell ill, and they no longer had the option, Irene nursing him through getting better and then through getting worse.

Only in the morning, lying in Vera’s bedroom, does Irene realize the odd thing about the apartment: there are no pictures anywhere and no photo albums. Jolted out of bed, Irene squats on the floor and bends, groping under the wooden frame. The trunk is there, at the stretch of her hand. Irene turns on the light and sits back down, examines a throng of her fingerprints on the dusty cardboard. Inside the trunk, she finds nothing but a frayed baby quilt and one photo—that of Vera, somewhat younger and fuller in the hips, next to a teenage boy, who looks a lot like Irene’s children when they were that age. Irene stares at the picture that says many things, none of which she can quite articulate. There’s an air of familiarity to the people in the picture, as well as suppressed tension, a disappointment too, their faces austere and tender at the same time. On the back of the picture, she reads: Ralph, 2006.

At the hospital, an hour later, Irene is told to wait while the nurse is dressing Vera’s scar and changing the bandages. The weather has turned rainy overnight, and the city is glazed with mist, slick wet surfaces everywhere, the reflection of headlights on the cobalt-black asphalt. Irene hasn’t had any breakfast except for a cup of tea, but she doesn’t feel hungry. When the nurse finally beckons her in, Irene has learned from the wall posters in the hallway almost as much information about the lungs as she did about the heart after John’s surgery. She’s also made a fascinating discovery: lobes are sections of the lung—right lung has three lobes, and left only two; each lobe is lined with alveoli, tiny air sacs where the exchange of gasses takes place; respiration is controlled automatically in the medulla of the brain, so that a person doesn’t have to always think about having to inhale and exhale; it’s the same type of automatic process that keeps the heart beating.

In the room, Vera is sitting up on the bed, the robe loose around her bony shoulders, the blue hospital gown showing. Her cheeks are revived with color, and her hair is combed and tuck behind her ears. But she still looks emaciated, drained of the energy Irene once envied. The IV machine has been unhooked and the chest tube removed earlier that morning. The room carries the aroma of apples piled in a bowl and moved next to the sink.

“What do they need washing?” Vera asks.
“Sure.” Irene walks to the sink and turns on the water, places the whole bowl under a cool stream. “They may be too hard to bite.”

“There’s a plastic knife somewhere.”

“I see it.” Irene turns off the water and picks out a garnet-red apple and also a wad of tissues she places on the tray table. She fits into the chair opposite from the bed and starts peeling the apple in one long drool. As soon as she finishes, she cuts the fruit in half, cores and slices it, handing a pink-fleshed piece to Vera. She holds it between her fingers gently, making Irene think of a rodent, small and skittish, and so frustratingly helpless.

“Fragrant,” Vera says and brings the apple to her mouth. “Almost like in Russia.” She chews with care, and Irene does too.

Her head swarms with questions she wishes she could just swat at or dart at Vera, like: Where are your parents? Do they know about the cancer? Why did you leave us? Where did you go? What became of you? Did you marry? Have a child? Who’s Ralph? How old is he? Eighteen? Nineteen? Are there any apple trees in Siberia?

“Do your parents grow apples?” Irene surprises Vera with the question, who studies Irene’s face for a moment, then says:

“No. They don’t grow anything.”

“But didn’t you say they were farmers?”

Again, there’s a slight pause, a weight to Vera’s silence.

“I grew up in an orphanage. I was left there when I was just a baby, on top of a rolled-up rug.”

“The one you brought to our house?”

“You still have it?”

“Yes. Of course. It’s a bit worn, but lovely. The colors are all blurred.” Irene passes Vera the rest of the apple, and they spend the next few minutes chewing. Irene fetches another fruit from the bowl. “You need to eat as many apples as you can. I have a trunk full. And there’s plenty more at home.”

“How are Mike and Zoe?” Vera relaxes against the pillows now, her eyes closed, her chin tilted up. Only her jaws are slightly moving.

“O.K. They are O.K. Zoe, she runs marathons in California. And Mike is somewhere in the Arctic Circle, chasing the Aurora Borealis.”
“John?”

Now the silence is all Irene’s, and Vera stops chewing; her eyelids tremble, but she doesn’t say a word. She looks tired, drifting off.

“You know,” she finally says and then swallows, “Aurora is really a girl. A girl in love. Sometimes she’s happy. Sometimes sad. Sometimes lonely and furious. But also stupid,” she pauses, managing a weak smile. “And that’s when the light is the most luminous.”

It’s Halloween night a week later. Irene has carved a pumpkin and placed it on the bistro table. When she lights the candle inside the gutted, hollow vegetable, she acknowledges that one eye is wider and much lower, which gives the face character. On other balconies, neighbors have done the same, placed lit jack-o-lanterns on tables or the guardrail. Anywhere Irene looks, she sees orange faces grinning in the dark. Earlier today, when she hauled groceries from the car, she noticed a monument across the street, a bronze statue dressed in a knee-length cape, a wig, and a red bowtie, with a large black bird on the shoulder and a head-sized pumpkin in the crook of the bent arm. Now, she can spot the same statue from the balcony, the cape billowing, the pumpkin aglow.

Vera has stuffed a whole chicken with cut-up apples and dried apricots, and Irene places it in the oven. She has already baked an apple pie this morning. She’s also bought a collapsible bed and set it in the living room, where Vera is lying in front of the TV, sharing an occasional comment or an observation. On Irene’s advice, to minimize the risk of infection, she doesn’t venture out much and wears only loose T-shirts and robes so as not to aggravate the scar. They haven’t yet shaved her hair, but they practice breathing exercises every day and adhere to the coughing technique.

“Scientists think that at one point, the entire observable universe would’ve been about the size of a sand grain,” Vera says. “Can you believe it?”

Irene shakes her head and passes Vera a cup of warm cider, which Vera makes an effort to reach even though it hurts her to lift her arm.

They are starting treatments on Wednesday, but today is only Monday, and the kitchen is still a workplace, still thriving with hearty smells. Irene knows that sometime, in the future, they’ll have to invite the children, Mike and Zoe, and Ralph too.
Also: There are months ahead of them, and possibly years.