

THE DOM DZIECKA

1.

In Polish, the word for toy is *zabawka*. I learned this word at an orphanage, not from my mother who already knew it, not from my language tutor, not from the adoption liaison. I learned the word from a four-year-old—not my four-year-old, the girl with the golden hair and colt-brown eyes, nor my six-year-old, the boy with the wild smile. I learned the word from a girl with silver hair, her blue eyes from somewhere near Scandanavia, her upturned nose in need of a tissue. She bounded toward me, the circle song now finished, and landed on both feet, shook my hand, as they all did, as they all had to, then turned to the Siostra, to the sister, and said in firecracker consonants, “Zabawki teraz?”

The Siostra, in her blue dress, her head covering smooth against her gray flesh, nodded and the children scrambled and jumped and ran to the bookshelf. The boxes and puzzles and cars floated in their little hands. My boy lain on the floor, on his side, his stick-legs hidden by his mushed pants, his wooden sandals bumping against the rug. He and another boy played “pociąg,” or train, taking the first car with two fingers and pulling along a cargo of blue and red and green blocks. There was no other world for them. No sunshine through lace, no girl stomping around with a balloon, no stroller charging into a wall, just the giant circles in the carpet and the rolling black wheels turning and twisting on the maple track.

2.

The next day I inquired about the toys. Our toys, the three toys we brought from America: the soft unicorn, the doll with orange-yarn hair, the

red convertible. The Siostra presented a white garbage bag filled with stuffed animals. “They will all receive a toy,” she said in Polish, “and your children will be given your toys.”

In the playroom, I entered with the white bag. The children’s eyes shifted, their hands dropped away from the scratched dishes and ripped doll clothes and creased puzzles. They rose from the gym mats and kiddie stoves, yelling and chattering and asking for the

“Kon,” the horse, a white unicorn with a glittering purple horn. My hand dug through the stuffing, the forms of lions, poodles, bears squished into the stretchy plastic. The down was warm on my fingers. There was no red convertible, no hard plastic of a car whose doors open, whose steering wheel turns, whose wheels roll like silk. There was nothing special for my boy.

The tiny hands danced over my arms, there was pleading, there were many eyes, blue, beige, gray and the deep brown of my four-year-old. Who will get the horse with the purple horn? My arm reached down down to the bottom of the bag, where an elephant and pig were back to back. There was nothing but air and fabric. The searching was difficult with a dozen high voices, a dozen children pleading, excited by the toys they cannot keep for themselves.

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In the courtyard, the children rode tricycles in circles. The sun was high. The Siostra stood in the shadow of a chestnut tree. Her eyes were alarmed. Why is a parent unaccompanied outside? Why is she holding the bag of stuffed animals? Something is out of order. We walked over the cobblestones to the door. The keys on a stretching-spiral band slid off her wrist and into the old lock. In the dark hallway we passed the Virgin statue, went up the linoleum stairs and entered the reception office. The young blonde was there, her mascara light, her hair pinned back, her sweater from a store I saw at the mall. She spoke scattered English, I spoke clumsy Polish. We smiled a

lot. She sat down at her computer and typed a note. The print out explained something ridiculous that I translated back to her in simple Polish. She nodded and said, “Yes, yes, this is this.”

I gave my son a dog with a broken zipper. He smiled and danced and posed for a picture anyway. There was no special car for just one boy. Red sports cars are too nice. Everything must be equal. Envy is everywhere at an orphanage. For four days my husband and I were watched though we didn’t know it. We were watched from the moment we entered the playroom until the moment we left—categorized, speculated on, wondered about, hoped for, gossiped about. Who are you and who are you here for? If one boy is given a special *zabawka*, the other boys will know. They will hurt. They’ll long. Longing is everywhere at the Dom Dziecka, whether it be for a red convertible or the “forever family” that comes and takes the lucky ones away.