



Catatumbo

A river. A lake. A light the world already knew. Then the light began to bring people.

The Lake

The river found the lake the way it always had.

Warm water meeting warmer water. A mouth of marsh and old oil. Mountains on three sides, a bowl that held the night in place, and a narrow cut north toward the Caribbean that never quite let the heat leave.

They had a name for the light.

Relámpago del Catatumbo.

Sailors had used it as a beacon. Satellites had counted it. Twenty-eight strikes in a minute, some nights, for hours, until the swamp at the river's mouth looked like day.

The year was 2031.

No one knew why the people had started to come.

She came down on mud.

Not a floor. Not a bed. Warm mud that took her hands to the wrist and smelled like a lake that had been struck too many times.

Lightning still lived in the air. It stood the hair up on her arms. It made the child in her turn, once, hard.

She was on her knees.

She did not remember kneeling.

A second ago there had been a kitchen. A glass of water. The low hum of a refrigerator she could have named by the sound. Then white. Then this.

Thunder arrived late, the way it does when the strike is already inside you.

She lifted her head.

The lake was a black plate. The far shore was a broken line of pale tents and white towers and the thin red blink of instruments that did not care if she understood them. Closer, on the mudflats, other shapes. Other women. Some standing. Some still on their hands. One laughing, high and wrong, because there was no other sound that fit.

Spanish, somewhere. English. A language she did not have a name for.

Another strike. The whole bowl of the world went white, and when it let go there was one more figure on the shore that had not been there.

Pregnant. Like her. Like the rest.

She put a hand on her belly.

"I know," she said.

Station 4 sat on pilings at the edge of the Juan Manuel swamps, where the Catatumbo finished its long argument with the land and gave up into the lake. Prefab walls. A generator that complained in the wet. A roof that had been re-grounded four times since the storms learned this new appetite.

Isabel Rivas watched the count tick.

It was not a weather count anymore. The weather still had its own screens. Those were the old numbers, the ones her professors had loved. Stroke density. Cloud-to-cloud. The nocturnal jet coming down the basin like a ribbon.

The new screen was simpler.

ARRIVALS.

The number jumped. 847. Then 848.

"South spit," said the tech, without looking up. "Same as the last six."

"I see her," Isabel said.

She did. Through the glass, in the leftover light of a strike that had not finished dying, a woman on her knees in the mud. One hand on the ground. One on her stomach.

They all did that. As if the first fact they needed was the child.

Isabel's own hand found the bench and stayed there. She was not pregnant. She had been on this lake when the light was only light. She had written papers about moisture and mountains and a river that fed a bowl. She still had the words.

None of them explained a kitchen becoming this mud in the time it took lightning to choose a path.

"World feed is hot," the tech said. "They're calling it majority view again."

Isabel did not look at the feed. The world had a window. She had a shore.

Outside, boats with quiet motors and painted numbers pushed toward the spit. Medics. Translators. The ones who had learned not to run at the new arrivals, because running made the lightning feel like a hunt.

It was not a hunt.

She did not have a better word.

The woman on the spit stood. Slow. Barefoot. Her dress was wrong for this country and right for a life that had existed twenty seconds ago.

Isabel picked up the handset.

"Station 4 to south spit. New arrival. Conscious. Upright. She's holding the child."

A pause. Static that was only static.

"Copy. We'll take her."

Isabel watched until the first boat kissed the mud and a medic stepped out with both hands visible.

The sky tore again.

The count read 849.

She set the handset down. The plastic was warm from her palm.

On the lake, the river kept arriving. It had nowhere else to go.

The Encampment

By morning the spit had been cleared.

The boats made the same trip until the mud was only mud again. Isabel went with the third run. She told herself it was the count. It was not the count.

The encampment sat inland of the swamps, where the ground remembered being a road. White tents. Generator light the color of weak tea. A Venezuelan flag that had given up staying dry. Next to it, the blue of something international that had arrived faster than anyone wanted to admit.

The women were already in rows.

Not lined up. Tended. Each on a cot, each with a blanket that did not match, each with a hand somewhere near the child.

Isabel stood in the aisle and did the thing her training had made automatic. She looked.

The same curve. The same weight. The same quiet hard shape under damp cloth.

Second trimester. All of them.

Not early enough to hide. Not late enough to be a crisis of the body. Midway. As if the lightning had a calendar.

She found the medic who had stepped out of the first boat with both hands visible. The woman's badge said Zulia. Her eyes said she had stopped sleeping.

"Are they—" Isabel started.

"The same," the medic said. "We thought it was the light. That we were seeing what we expected." She shook her head once. "Ultrasound. Fundal height. Sixteen to twenty-four weeks. Every one we have touched."

"How many have you touched?"

"Enough."

A doctor farther down the tent called for a translator in French, then Mandarin, then something Isabel did not have. The local government had moved the way a government moves when the world is already watching: fast, and a little afraid of looking slow. Police tape at the tree line. A man in a pressed shirt who kept saying *evaluación* into a phone that did not care. Trucks. More tents. A list that grew faster than the paper.

They were not from here.

That was the other thing Isabel saw, once she let herself see it. A woman whispering to a nurse in English that had Chicago in it. Another who would only speak until someone found Wolof. A third who kept making the sign of the cross the way they did it in the south of Poland, not the way they did it in Maracaibo. The States. Africa. Europe. Asia. A whole map folded into one wet aisle.

And at the far end, a cot that had drawn a small crowd of people with clipboards.

The woman on it had a windburn that did not belong to this lake. Her hair was still cut for a hood. On the table beside her, in a plastic bag, a badge that said she had been attached to a research vessel at the bottom of the world.

Antarctica.

Isabel read the name twice. She did not say it aloud.

The woman on the cot had both hands on her belly. Second trimester. Same as the kitchen. Same as the laugh on the mud. Same as eight hundred and forty-nine others, and the ones still coming.

"I was on watch," she said, in English that had frost still in it. "There was no storm. There is never a storm like that down there." She looked at the tent roof as if it might open. "Then there was."

Isabel sat on the empty cot across from her.

She did not have a better word than the one she had not had on the water.

The lightning had reached the ice.

And it had brought a woman who should not have been reachable at all.

The Watch

Isabel did not sit back.

"Pregnant," she said. "Second trimester. What are you doing on a research vessel at the bottom of the world?"

The woman on the cot looked at her the way one scientist looks at another when the question is fair and a little late.

"Atmospheric research." A breath. One hand stayed on the twins. "I have unique knowledge of the project. That's why we carried an OB. Just in case. Even though I was only twenty weeks." She almost smiled. It did not last. "Twins."

Isabel heard the word and filed it. Twenty weeks. Still inside the window. Two heartbeats instead of one. The lightning had not made an exception. Or it had made a precise one.

"You were on watch," Isabel said.

"I was on watch."

"There is no Catatumbo in Antarctica."

"There is no anything like this in Antarctica." The woman's English still had frost in it. "We measure the air. The ice. The way the sky leans on the bottom of the planet. I know that project. I know what the instruments should say when the world is behaving." She glanced at the tent wall, which was moving now, not from people. "It was not behaving."

"Name," Isabel said.

"Anja. Anja Kade."

"Isabel Rivas. Station 4."

"Weather."

"Weather," Isabel said. "Until it stopped being weather."

They talked the way people talk when the only other language left is the work. Arrival counts. Stroke density. Twenty-eight a minute when the lake was only a lake. More now. The nocturnal jet. The bowl of mountains. Anja asked about methane and oil and the old papers. Isabel asked about the vessel, the OB, the last

thing Anja had been holding when the white came. A stylus. A screen. A cup of coffee that had gone cold the way coffee goes cold at the bottom of the world.

"You were twenty weeks," Isabel said. "They still let you winter-over."

"They needed me." No pride in it. A fact. "The OB was the compromise. I was the condition."

Isabel nodded once. She understood a condition.

Outside, the storms had stopped pretending to be the old spectacle. Thunder stacked on thunder. The generator coughed and caught. A guy-line sang and then went slack. Someone shouted in Spanish for the far tents. Water found the aisle and made a dark river of its own.

"This won't hold," Anja said.

Isabel was already on her feet.

The local government had been making lists. Now it made a decision. Charter buses, still with their company names on the sides, nosed into the mud where the road remembered itself. Drivers who had not signed up for this. Medics counting by cot, by belly, by language.

"Everyone who can walk, walks," the Zulia medic said. "The rest we carry. The high school. The big one. Gym first."

Isabel helped Anja sit up. Anja's jaw set. Twenty weeks. Twins. She stood anyway.

"Your instruments," Anja said.

"Can get wet. You can't."

A look between them. Not friendship yet. The beginning of the thing friendship is made from, when two minds refuse to leave a problem on the floor.

They went out into it.

The lake was a white mouth. Lightning wrote on it faster than any count. Buses filled. Wet hair. Wet blankets. A girl from Chicago saying she had been in a grocery store. The woman who needed Wolof holding another woman's hand because hands did not require a translator.

Isabel took the second bus. Anja took the seat beside her without asking.

The high school rose out of the rain like a fact. Concrete. A covered walk. A gymnasium that had held graduations and funerals and now this. Cots already blooming on the court. The scoreboard dark. The air smelled of floor wax and wet wool and the storm trying to come inside.

Isabel stood in the doorway and watched the last bus empty.

Anja's hand found her own belly. Both twins, Isabel thought. Or one. There was no way to know which child had turned first when the lightning chose her.

"We should write it down," Anja said. "Everything. Before we start believing the wrong story."

"Yes," Isabel said.

Outside, the Relámpago kept arriving.

It had nowhere else to go.

The Thousand

The storms did not ease at the high school.

They found the building and tried to come through it. Lightning hit close enough that the scoreboard flickered once, a dead red, and went out again. Each strike had a sound now that was not only thunder. It was a pressure. It sat on the chest.

And the women answered it.

Not one. Not a few. All of them.

A cry would start in the far bleachers and arrive in the gym before the echo did. Hands went to bellies. The same motion Isabel had seen on the spit, multiplied by a building. Anja's fingers locked on her own stomach. Her jaw went white.

"Too soon," Anja said.

Isabel knew. Sixteen weeks. Twenty. Twenty-four. A body that contracted now was a body arguing with a child who was not ready. Two children, in Anja's case. The math was ugly either way.

Then a door banged at the far end of the hall and a medic came through with another woman who was still wet from the lake, and the gym contracted with her.

All of them. At once.

Isabel counted breaths the way she used to count strikes. The new arrival was folded onto a cot. The cries rose, held, broke. Too early. Contractions nonetheless. A first-time body doing work it had no map for, and doing it in chorus.

"It's the arrivals," Isabel said.

Anja's eyes were open and very clear. "Or the lightning. Or both. We don't have a control."

"We have a gym."

The count climbed. 980. 994. A last cluster of boats, a last wet line of women through the covered walk, and then the radios went quiet in a way radios go quiet when there is nothing left to add.

1.

Isabel stood under the dark scoreboard and let the number sit. One thousand. The entire school had been taken. Classrooms. The library. A locker room that still smelled of chlorine. Cots in the hallways where trophies watched from glass. Living space went tight. Knees and blankets and the small politics of who slept near the window.

The women began to sort themselves the way water finds a level.

Not by the medics' lists. By mouth. English found English. Spanish had already been home. Wolof made a corner by the water fountains. Mandarin took two classrooms and closed the doors most of the way. Polish. French. A language Isabel still could not name, gathered under the basketball hoop like a secret. Isolated pockets. Their own kind. Hands that could ask a question and be understood.

Isabel walked the pockets with a notebook that was getting wet at the edges. Anja walked with her, slower, one palm always on the twins.

In the third classroom a doctor from the encampment stopped them. She looked like she had not sat down since the lake.

"Another thing," the doctor said. "We asked. Charts. Translators. All of them."

Isabel waited.

"First pregnancies. Every one. No prior births. No losses they will name. Primigravida. One thousand times."

Anja said nothing for a long time.

"That isn't a sample," she said. "That's a rule."

"No one can explain it," the doctor said. "I am not asking you to."

Isabel looked at the gym. At the tight aisles. At the pockets of language holding themselves together because language was the only wall they had.

If the lightning kept writing. If the next strike pulled the same chorus. If one thousand first wombs decided, together, that it was time—

There would be no managing it. Not with the staff they had. Not with the high school. Not with a city already watching the sky instead of the doors.

A medical event the size of a war, and no one to call who would arrive in time.

Isabel closed the notebook.

Her hand was not steady.

Anja saw it. She did not pretend not to.

"We write it down," Anja said. Quiet. The same sentence as the bus, only heavier.

"And we pray the count stays a count."

Outside, the Relámpago answered anyway.

The Base

Isabel found him in what had been the principal's office.

A political man. Pressed shirt that had given up being pressed. The same phone as the encampment, still saying *evaluación* to people who were not in the room. A Venezuelan flag behind him that had been hung for a different kind of meeting.

"We need more," she said. She did not sit. "Assistance. A larger place. If they all go at once this gym is a grave."

He looked at her notebook. At the number she had written large enough for a man who did not want to read.

1.

"Then it is no longer a school problem," he said.

He made a call that did not sound like a first call.

"The military," he said, when he set the phone down. "The size requires it."

Isabel wanted to ask how long that sentence had been waiting. She did not.

Dawn came anyway.

The storms let go the way a fist lets go. Not kindly. Just done. The last lightning walked out over the lake and did not come back. In the gym the cries thinned. Hands stayed on bellies, but the work inside them eased. Anja's face changed. The twins settled. She sat up against the bleachers and became, again, the woman who had wintered at the bottom of the world.

"Level," she said, when Isabel crouched in front of her. "I am level."

"Good."

"Don't trust dawn," Anja said. "Trust the count."

Military transports took the covered walk as if they had measured it in advance. Canvas. Numbers. Men who did not look surprised to be loading pregnant women onto trucks at first light. The language pockets held as they moved. Wolof stayed Wolof. Mandarin took two trucks. Isabel and Anja took the third because no one told them not to.

The base was inland. Concrete. A fence that had always been a fence. Room enough to spread out, finally, cots in rows that were rows on purpose. Military medics were already there. Civilian doctors arrived behind them, badges still from the lake, from the town, from a hospital that had sent who it could. They began the assessments as if a protocol had been opened to the right page. Heartbeats. Fundal heights. The contractions that had gone quiet with the sky.

By early morning the equipment came.

Ultrasound. Monitors. Cases that still had factory seals and cases that did not. Tents that were not the swamp tents. A well-oiled machine, if you did not look at the hour. If you did not look at how little anyone asked *why*.

Isabel stood in the aisle with Anja and watched a corporal plug in a bank of monitors without checking a list.

"They're responding well," Isabel said.

Anja watched a second longer.

"Too well."

Isabel did not answer at first.

The official had decided the military in one phone call. The transports had known the walk. The medics had known the count. The equipment had been close enough to arrive before the coffee.

Like they had done this before.

Perhaps.

Anja's hand was calm on the twins.

"We write that down too," she said.

Isabel already had.

The Oddity

They kept gathering metrics because metrics were the only language that did not argue.

Ultrasound after ultrasound. A private thing made public because a thousand first pregnancies in one fence had ended the old courtesies. Some of the women had not wanted to know. In this situation, the doctors said, it was an exception. The screen did not care about the exception. It only showed.

Girls.

All of them. Row after row. A daughter in every womb they opened a window on. The translators had to say it in every pocket. Some women cried. Some laughed the way people laugh when the ground moves and they are still standing. A few put a hand up, no, and then lowered it, because the image was already there.

Isabel wrote it down. She wrote it down again, because once did not feel like enough.

Then Anja's turn.

Fraternal. Two sacs. Two hearts that did not match. One girl. One boy.

The room went quiet in a way a military tent is not supposed to go quiet.

Anja stared at the screen until the tech looked away.

"Why me?" she said.

Isabel heard herself answer before she had decided to.

"You'll lead them. You were chosen."

Anja turned. Scientist first. Mother second. The twins a fact between the two.

"What? How? This is my first. A twin set at that."

Isabel did not know. She knew the feel of it, which was not the same as knowing. Anja's role sat in her the way a reading sat on an instrument when the needle would not come off the peg.

"I don't know it," Isabel said. "I feel it. That's all I have."

Anja waddled the aisle later, the walk of twenty weeks with two. She looked at the other women. They looked back. Warm. Smiling. Despite the fence, despite the monitors, despite a night that had tried to pull them all into labor at once. As if they already recognized her and had not been told why.

Isabel watched that too.

She wrote *oddity* and then crossed it out and wrote *Anja* and left it.

Later in the day the Red Cross came through the gate. Then the others. Global relief with the names on the vests, doctors who had not been on the lake, crates of food, crates of the ordinary mercy of clean kits and formula that might not be needed for months. The local official stood by a truck and let his shoulders drop. A sigh of relief that was almost human.

Isabel did not tell him about the boy.

Anja already knew.

One boy among a thousand girls, and a woman from the ice who had asked why me, and a gym's worth of first mothers smiling at her like an answer.

Isabel added a line under the count.

She did not show Anja that one yet.

The Ward

The day made a maternity ward out of a base.

Sheets on lines. Screens that had been meant for other work. Pods of women, four or six to a space, a little privacy where there had been only rows. The language pockets found walls. Wolof closed a flap. Mandarin hung a blanket. Spanish did not need to. They started to help each other. Water. A hand at a back. A girl from Chicago showing someone how the cot latch worked because no one had said it in the right tongue yet.

Isabel had been afraid of the other math. Scarcity. Fighting. A thousand first mothers and not enough of anything.

It did not happen.

They had enough. The Red Cross crates. The military kitchen. The ordinary miracle of a line that did not break. Women passed what they were given and kept passing it.

Anja was grateful for Isabel's company. She said it once, walking, and then she did not need to say it again. They went the aisles together. Compared. Took notes. Heart rates. Who had smiled at Anja and who had only watched. The boy, still a quiet fact. The girls, not quiet at all.

It was becoming apparent that everyone would help everyone through this. Not because a doctor had asked. Because the night had already taught them what alone felt like.

Later in the afternoon the storm clouds began to gather again.

They knew what the night would bring. The lake was out of sight and still they felt it. The bowl. The river feeding it. The light learning its old hunger.

A doctor stood in the center aisle with a translator at each shoulder.

"The night contractions may return," she said. "Everyone must remain calm."

Calm. As if calm were a switch.

Sure enough, after sundown, the day let go.

The lightning came back. Not as loud as the swamp. Loud enough. It wrote on the far side of the fence and the bodies answered.

Not Braxton Hicks. Isabel had read the difference in a book that had not imagined this. These were contractions. Real work. Early. A first body exercising its right for birth, even if the child was not ready to take it.

Anja's hand found Isabel's arm. The twins moved. Her face stayed level. Her breath did not.

All down the ward, the pods lit up with the same sound. Hands on bellies. Women helping women. A thousand first daughters being told, too soon, that the night had a claim.

Isabel wrote *returned* and underlined it.

The doctor had been right.

Calm was the work now.

The Relámpago did not care.

The Hold

A routine settled over the next few days.

Dawn quiet. Night work. Notes. Isabel and Anja walking the same aisles until the aisles knew them.

Then the first woman tried to leave.

Not a flight. A test. A walk toward the gate because a person has a life on the other side of a fence, even if that life was a kitchen that no longer existed. She made it as far as the painted line. The contraction hit her like a hand from the inside. Sharp. Not the night chorus. Personal. A body saying no.

They brought her back. The pain let go. Her measurements, which had spiked, fell as if the location itself were a dose and she had been given it again.

They tried it twice more, with volunteers who understood what they were volunteering for. Same result. Leave the encampment, the general location, and

the body punished. Settle back in, and the body returned to what now counted as normal.

Anja wrote *geofence* and then crossed it out. Too clean a word for a womb.

"We're held," she said.

Isabel nodded. "By the lake. Or by each other. Or both."

The other discovery took longer because it hid in the charts.

They had arrived at different weeks. Sixteen. Eighteen. Anja at twenty with two. Twenty-four. The second trimester as a spread, not a point.

The spread was closing.

Fundal heights moving toward one another. Heart rates finding a common tempo. The time between contractions, on the nights the lightning wrote, leveling out as if a thousand clocks had been set to the same hour. Pregnancies syncing. Bodies agreeing on a calendar no one had posted.

Isabel laid the graphs on a crate and Anja stood over them, one hand on the twins, the boy still the quiet fact.

"They're becoming one event," Anja said.

"They already were," Isabel said. "We're only now measuring it."

Afterward

The question began to range through the pods.

"What happens? We have our baby here. Can we go afterward?"

No one had an answer that was not a guess. The gate still punished a body that tried it. Afterward was a country they had not been allowed to see.

Another woman, from the English pocket, said it plainer.

"A community of women, all with child afterward? Nursing. Bathing. Nurturing each other. Including the mothers themselves."

Isabel did not look at her notebook.

"A community, yes," she said. "Humanity. Motherhood. Coming together to take care of each other."

Anja's mouth tightened, then eased. Scientist. Then mother. Then the count.

"Yes. Wet nursing as well. Taboo, to some. It will be required here. Because of the number."

A thousand first daughters. One boy. Milk as logistics and as mercy. Isabel wrote *required* and did not dress it up.

Later a woman pulled Anja over by the sleeve. Not hard. Certain. Her other hand made a gesture across Anja's body, the swell, the change that was arriving faster than twenty weeks had any right to.

"You are our leader, yes?"

Anja looked down at the hand, then at the twins.

"Yes. Body changes. Quickly too." A breath. "Oh. I know."

She laid her own hand on her belly. The twins kicked. Active. Both of them, or one of them speaking for two. The ward felt it the way a room feels a door opening.

Isabel stood a little apart and let the moment be Anja's.

Leader. The word the other women had been smiling around. Anja had not taken a throne. She had taken a question and put her palm on the answer.

Afterward was still unwritten.

The community had already begun.

Rehearsals

Every night the pregnant body ran the rehearsals.

The women came together the way a mosque comes together for prayer. They knew the timing. They knew what to do. Religion did not matter. Politics did not matter. Logistics fell away. When the nightly rehearsals came, there was only the work, and the bodies that had learned it.

That, too, became a routine. They learned to live with it.

Whatever it was, it was preparing them for labor.

Too soon for Braxton Hicks. The books still said so. The contractions were powerful nonetheless. A first body exercising a right it was not yet time to claim,

and claiming the practice anyway.

Anja would be mid-sentence, mid-note, mid-step, and then she had to stop. Her body forced her to partake. No exception for the woman from the ice. No exception for the oddity. She went to her knees among them, or to the edge of a cot, and the twins kicked as if they had been waiting for the hour. They felt the body. The belly went hard. The kicks were fierce.

Isabel soothed what she could. A hand at Anja's back. Water. A count under her breath that was for Anja and for the notebook both. She assisted. She did not look away. And she kept writing. Numbers. Data. Trends. Patterns. The minute the chorus began. The minute it let go. Who folded first. Who lasted. How the pods moved like one lung.

Eventually one woman would lead the tidal wave that would turn into a tsunami. Not tonight.

A loss of a mucus plug, here. Water breaking, there. Signs that belonged to a later chapter. Not yet.

The rehearsal ended the way prayer ends. A last sound. A settling. Women helping women back onto cots. Anja's palm on the twins until they quieted.

Isabel closed the notebook on a line she had not shown anyone.

Not yet.

The Relámpago, out past the fence, had already started tomorrow's count.

Offerings

The pods began to contribute.

One crocheted baby blankets, the yarn pulled from Red Cross kits and from whatever a soldier could find in town. Soft squares the color of other countries. Another made furniture. Small. A bassinet from crates. A rocking frame that did not quite rock until a third woman taught it how. Another offered yoga in the morning, before the heat, a stretch and a breath and a routine the bodies could keep when the night took everything else.

They passed what they made the way they passed water. No one fought over it.

Anja felt different.

She knew the numbers. Twins did not usually last to term. Thirty-seven was a hope. Thirty-two was a line a doctor drew and called victory if you crossed it. Her body, this pregnancy, sat slightly to the side of the others. And it was. She was the only one carrying two.

She could hope for thirty-two. Longer, if the body allowed. Longer, if the twins did not force their way out.

Mommy, I'm demanding to be let out of here. It's crowded in here.

She thought it to herself. A joke that was not a joke. One voice or two. She put her palm on the crowd of them and did not answer aloud.

Through the base the bellies had started to look extended. The look people called third trimester, even if the calendars they had arrived with still said second. The syncing had a visible tense now. Weight came on fast. Appetites picked up and then kept picking up. An influx of food moved the aisles. Different kinds. Different parts of the world, made from what they had at hand, and from what the Red Cross could still secure. A pot from the Wolof corner. Bread from the Chicago girl. Rice, spice, something fried in a pan that had been a mess kit yesterday. They ate like bodies that had been given a job.

The women's backs began to arch.

Isabel wrote *third* and put a question mark after it, then looked at Anja's profile in the morning stretch and erased the mark.

The yoga teacher counted breaths. The blankets piled up. The little furniture waited for children who were not ready, and were getting ready anyway.

Anja walked the offerings with her hands at the small of her back.

Thirty-two, she told the twins.

Not yet.