I’m following my sister Cassie in her aqua-colored Saturn to Valerie’s baby shower. When we approach the long white house on a hillside, I recognize it. In another lifetime, I’ve been here before, when I was part of the Finnish Apostolic Lutheran Church. Friday and Saturday nights, I went out with “the Kyds,” a group of churchgoers ages fifteen to thirty that routinely gathered weekend nights. The last time I set foot inside this expensive home was for a Christmas party, wherein my friend’s dad showed up dressed as Santa to tell corny jokes and single out particular members of the group. I must have been about eighteen or so, and Santa’s gift to me was a compass, a nudge at my hopeless sense of direction.

Now as I park behind Cassie, I feel uneasy. Nearly ten years later, I am coming back to the same house—only this time I don’t feel invited. I’ve broken away from the church I’ve been raised in, and I know I am an outsider.

Cassie and I push open the solid oak door. I see Ginny Huotari, who stood in my parents’ wedding and whose family we visited frequently while growing up. She’s sitting with her back to us, her head whiter and smaller than I remember it being, and she’s holding someone’s red-headed baby. On the rare occasions I see her, she asks about my creative writing and expresses interest. It’s my mother, her college roommate, that Ginny hardly acknowledges now, after my parents left the church.

It’s ten a.m., and the other women milling around the living room are chatting with one another, many holding cups of coffee. Their faces are the way I have remembered them: an almost floury white and so clean I can almost smell the soap. Without makeup, I can clearly see the
landscape of creases and valleys, which looks unnatural after the smoothing layers of foundation I’m used to seeing.

I sense eyes flickering over our features, taking in Cassie’s mascara, my earrings, and then glancing away. Where we walk and move, a vacuumed swath of air opens up, closing only after we pass.

**

Pomegranates are on my mind. Two years ago I attended a fundraiser for my sister-in-law and her husband. They hoped to adopt a child from Ethiopia, and Holly was selling her artwork to save up the small fortune required to adopt internationally. Originally, Owen and I planned to simply contribute, but after wandering through her makeshift gallery in the basement of a church, I came across a vivid watercolor. A fruit resembling grapefruit was split open, glistening seeds like black rubies emptying out. The fruit’s skin was shades of maroon, dark red, and purple-red. I was so taken with it I asked Holly if we could instead purchase the piece with our donation. I didn’t recognize the fruit at the time, but I know it now as a pomegranate.

In Mexico a year later, Owen and I ate fruit like sugary candy. We could finally put a taste to a name: mango, papaya, star fruit.

I’ve never seen or held a pomegranate before, however, until I happen to spot a pile of bright apple-looking fruit in Wal-mart’s produce section. There is no small irony in discovering this exotic fruit at America’s most frequented discount store, selling for two dollars apiece.

At the checkout, the clerk warns me that the juice is clear but will stain your fingers a deep red. I am reminded of reading that scholars claim the fruit Eve ate in the Garden of Eden was a pomegranate.
Cassie and I make our way toward the kitchen, where her friends are standing. Ginger is seven months pregnant and I notice the wrinkles around the corners of her smile with some surprise; she’s two years younger than me. Next to her is Naomi, her lemon juice-bleached hair coarse and thick, her stance casual and yet conscious of observation. She’s straddling the narrow line of exploring faith outside the church yet doing just enough to pass for “in.” Linnea, the only woman of the three who’s left the church like us, has a child on her hip. Her brown eyes and features would be lovely even without the artful makeup she is wearing. These women, who were in the same Sunday school class as Cassie, form a knot apart from the other shower attendees. For Naomi and Ginger, the lines are fluid, and next Sunday will find them sitting with their families in the church pews as comfortably as they converse with us. For Linnea and us, the lines are fixed. Politeness is the most we can share with the majority of the women present.

Shortly after our arrival, the hostess begins distributing a basket with blue hymnals and someone calls out a number. Unlike most churches, these hymnals have no musical notes, just the words. The older versions have a section in back written entirely in Finnish, reminiscent of a time when all of the sermons were delivered in Finn.

Even though I have a feeling most women there don’t focus on the rich context of the words they sing, I am still moved by the lifting of unaccompanied womanly voices.

I spot Valerie sitting on the couch, a large corsage pinned to her shirt. She’s been my friend since sixth grade. My leaving the church has definitely cost us some years of closeness, but I feel like our friendship is turning warmer lately. I’ve come to this shower for her, although I anticipate she’ll be surrounded by family and friends from her church and not have time for me.
Her baby is only three weeks old, and the shower’s inopportune to say the least. Initially, it was planned for before Niiko’s birth, but time conflicts with the church ladies who were planning it caused them to postpone it. Throughout the planning process, the ladies contacted Valerie’s mother and sister, but never her directly. Valerie insists, however, that the ladies are gracious to throw her a shower, though they do it for every new mother in the church.

I spend most of the shower holed up in the kitchen. My older sister Megan, the only member of my immediate family still in the church, stops by to talk. She was bewildered and hurt by the family exodus from the church, which must have seemed extreme to her pragmatic, conservative mind. Nowadays, she seems more at ease when the subject turns to God and spirituality, but still stiffens when the conversation becomes passionate.

My oldest sister’s mother-in-law crosses the linoleum and apparently feels obligated to exchange a cursory hello when she recognizes me on a stool at the kitchen island. “Where’s that sister of yours?” she asks. Cassie is sitting right next to me as Marcy speaks, but we both know she is referring to Megan, the only sane person in our family, by Marcy’s standards. When Megan turns with a tight smile, Marcy says to her, “God’s peace.”

I can’t remember if Megan returned her greeting or not. I know that Megan hates it when Marcy uses her to publicly distinguish between the saved in their church and the hell-bound majority outside of it with her “God’s peace.”

After this exchange, I am serving myself orange slices from the brunch laid out when I see a family portrait of the hostess’ family. Her children must number between twelve and fifteen. I glance back at her slim, athletic form and remember what my cousin shared with me about FALC women. The church forbids using birth control in any form, but recently, more women have taken
up running and lost weight to the point where they no longer menstruate, ending the decade plus years of gestation.

*  

At home, I read up on how to prepare a pomegranate on a site promoting the California-grown varieties. I learn the etymology of the fruit: it was named in Middle French pomme garnete, or seeded apple. Sometimes called the Chinese apple, it originated in Asia and is thought to have been brought to North America by Spanish missionaries.  

My first cut is awkward, the blade struggling through the dense, pliable skin as I chop off the spiky crown. The inner membrane has the color and texture of the yellow-white underside of an orange peel. Following the three-step, no-mess method, I place the body of the fruit in a bowl of water and slice it into sections. Nestled tightly into the cream-colored pith are red arils, juice-filled sacs. As I pull the pith apart, I release them into the water. The arils are shaped like individual kernels of corn, only larger, and they have a jewel-like translucency that reveals the seed at the core of the juice sac. They pass through my fingers like light.  

*  

As the shower wanes, I notice Valerie glance at me several times as she opens presents with her mother, sisters, and in-laws. I realize there are no friends gathered to watch, only the requisite six to ten year-old girls with flushed cheeks, who carry the packages to her.  

Later, I sit beside Valerie on the couch, holding her baby. His skin is softer than any fabric manufactured, and his heat radiates through my arms and torso. She seems pleased and even
comforted by my presence. It occurs to me that, though anyone Finn who attends the church is included, there is a stark difference between rote acceptance and real intimacy. Valerie, an educated, working woman living outside of the tiny towns bordering the church, is an anomaly. Other women, most of them hardworking stay-at-home mothers with nothing beyond a high school diploma, can’t relate to her. They distance themselves from what they don’t understand.

I sensed the ache inside her when she and her husband were waiting to conceive, and I know now she’s hoping her elevation to motherhood will establish common ground and win her a place in the exclusive community that is her church’s heart.

**

Slowly I empty the pomegranate’s pith, which reveals a honeycomb pattern, with bunches of arils tucked up inside. Owen watches intently as I drain the water from the bowl and separate the arils into two portions.

The first aril inside my mouth bursts open, flooding juice, while the seed inside makes a satisfying crunch between my teeth. The taste is first sweet, then mellow, with a trace of tartness immediately and a slightly bitter aftertaste from the seed.

The pomegranate is known for a high level of potassium and antioxidants, but for now, the arils are simply edible garnets we eat, the matching blue bowls from our wedding set touching.

I forgot to look at the label before I stripped the fruit, but I like to think I am eating the Early Wonderful variety, or perhaps simply Wonderful. Juice splatters my old sweatshirt and leaves drops on my cheek, but it easily washes away.