

*What Love Tastes Like*

“This *kielbasa* is no good.” She scratched at an eyebrow and pushed the saucer away. “No good,” she repeated. She looked out the window.

The women at the table exchanged glances with matching arched brows.

*Let's just leave it*, Anna mouthed.

*Let me try*, Paula mouthed back.

The first woman rolled her eyes. Then they both looked out the window too.

The vintage items in the small apartment seemed to match the older woman, while the beige and brass tones more closely resembled a Hilton Hotel lobby circa 1982. The sitting room smelled new, blandly furnished in tones of cream and beige. A modest loveseat squatted behind a veneer coffee table. Two gilt mirrors hung on the walls, along with a few framed family pictures, and some crumbling bouquets of dried flowers in paper sconces. A tiny bedroom with a single bed faded into shadows with the door open. The flat-screen television monitor mounted to the wall of the sitting room showed silently screaming *Wheel of Fortune* contestants.

Neither woman seemed predisposed to either leave it or try it, deadlocked in their own unclear competition.

“When is the real *kielbasa* coming?” the older woman demanded. “I want it like I like it. Fresh slice of rye, and ... and good mustard. Not this. What's, where's this from? What, Hick... Hickory Farms? This is all greasy, tastes like nothing. It has nothing. I want real mustard, and rye.” Suddenly her eyes welled up. “What's this place, why am I here? Where's Pawel?”

She looked around. She clutched at a wrinkled tissue in the sleeve of her cardigan and pulled it out, slowly unrolling a linty cherry cough drop from its layer of insulation. It dropped with a plastic click onto the table. She pushed the cough drop aside and dabbed at her eyes.

“Where's Pawel?” she repeated. “Paaaaaaaaawwwwwwwel.” She drew the syllables out as though speaking to a toddler, or the village idiot.

Anna's eyes began to well up too. Her nose blushed at the tip. Paula resolutely looked forward and maintained a stony poker face, the result of years of practice. *Mind over matter*.

“Pawel’s over there, *babciu*,” Paula said, smiling weakly and gesturing toward a sepia portrait of a handsome man with a meticulously groomed moustache.

“That’s not Pawel.” She looked down at her knotty knuckles. “I am nobody’s *babciu*,” she whispered. “I am Zofia.”

Her mind slipped off to a place years before, when Pawel was with her every day and they were both young. The sun shone brightly in the fields outside of Katowice. They were picking warm raspberries and eating them, playfully pushing them into each other’s open mouths. He looked at her, smiling, his pupils large in the dense shade at the edge of the potato field. “This is what love tastes like,” he murmured. “Oh, Zofia, let it be soon.”

Her mind slid back further to a dark winter lined with heavy snowbanks, her feet laced into warm boots, tasting the metallic snow. Her own *babcia* pulled her into the house, closing the heavy wooden door behind them against the cold, and sat her at the dining room table. Dozens of thin strips of paper lay in neat lines and groups, their bright colors welcome protection against the grey winter, the dim light, the dying fire. A tool slipped into her hand: the smooth dowel and its tiny spire.

“Like this,” her *babcia* said. “Like so,” taking a strip of red paper and twirling it around and around the needle.

She picked up a yellow strip and did likewise, this time crimping it in the middle, then twirling the other end so that it made a miniature spiralled heart. A collection of colorful curlicues grew on one side of the table.

“We’ll make a beautiful vase,” her *babcia* cooed. “We’ll put last summer’s lavender and poppies in it, and then we’ll think of summer until it comes again!”

“It always comes again,” the child Zofia murmured to herself, picking up a blue paper strip. “Summer.”

“My darling, it does!” her *babcia* trilled. “It *does*.”

Another memory struggled to the fore, a time after leaving Katowice, after the war. Newer and harder to summon. A time in a place where the winters were similar, long with steep snowbanks. But she had known it before, she had seen this winter before. The children started at nine in the

morning, no walk to school, just the bus. Still, the image of the yellow bus crunching down the hill made her stomach seize in panic.

“Where are they going, when are they coming back?” Oh, it was all muddling again. She realized she was speaking out loud. “When are they coming back?” she said again.

Anna and Paula looked at her. “*Babciu*, who?”

“All of them,” she cried.

“All who?” they asked in unison, their eyes wide.

“Oh, we did what we could, we tried, we tried,” she said. She looked around the beige room in panic. Her fingers found the linty cough drop. She examined it between her thumb and forefinger and, unable to shear it of its microscopic fleece, popped the drop into her mouth to calm herself.

“This is what love tastes like,” she murmured.