

There are two types of woman in Poland.

I am one of the first. The workers. We live in villages or poorer sections of cities like Warsaw and Krakow. Our hair, eyes, and skin are all as brown as the earth. Maybe long ago we sprang up from the Polish dirt itself and got to work plowing, planting, and harvesting. We are sturdy and strong. Our loose, thick dresses in shades of grey and brown drape over our wide frames, hiding whatever feminine curves might be hiding underneath. We take care of our ever-multiplying Catholic families and do all of the mending, washing, cooking, cleaning, tilling, curing, growing, and providing. Once most of the men were dead or in prison after the uprising, we did everything else as well.

When I was just a girl, my father took me to Warsaw in the summer and I saw one of the other type of Polish woman for the first time. We were at the market buying new farming equipment and other tools and supplies that couldn't be found in our small village. Though it was not the wealthiest area of Warsaw, we still looked out of place in our patched and shabby clothes. My father paid no mind, but my cheeks remained a shameful shade of pink that deepened into scarlet when I saw a beautiful coach pull up in front of us on the street. A gentleman stepped out and held his hand toward the inside of the coach. It was grasped by the daintiest set of fingers I had ever seen, gloved in white silk with ornate rings on two of the fingers. I looked for a second at my own hands, already calloused even at my young age and somehow always dirty, with stout chubby fingers and uneven nails. I looked back up quickly and left my father in the dark shop, stepping onto the street to get a better look. I was only a few feet away.

Her hair was a golden blonde, intricately done up high behind her head, but with little cloudy ringlets escaping onto her forehead and in front of her ears. Everything about her looked

light and soft, as if at any moment she could float away at will. Her skin was marzipan, smooth and soft and never too shiny. She wore a crisp white blouse buttoned up to her throat. Over it was a black bodice with gold and green accents stitched in a festive pattern with a full skirt that added red intertwining with the green and gold. It was, and she was, the most beautiful thing I had ever seen.

It was lucky that my father had to focus on driving our cheap wooden cart on the return home. He would not have approved of the tears that rolled silently down my face. ‘Good Polish women do not cry.’ I thought only of the woman I had seen, and what her life must have been like. She probably had a bed to herself, and did not have to share one with three brothers like I did. Maybe the man she was with was her husband, I thought. Her only job in life was to look beautiful for him. I would not be good at that job, I thought bitterly. I allowed myself a few minutes to lament the injustice of my station in life. Then I folded my hands together and looked resolutely forward. I was finished pitying myself, for good.

It was December. In November of the previous year, young soldiers in Warsaw sparked a year-long revolt to free Poland from Russia, who claimed sovereignty over much of our country. All able-bodied Polish men, from duke to priest to beggar, rushed to join the fight, bringing with them any horses, weapons, or supplies, leaving any women. My brothers all left as soon as news reached our little village. They did not return. My father and mother had already died and I had not yet married. I was completely alone.

Bands of Russian soldiers still remained, some in the cities, some roaming about the countryside rounding up remaining pockets of suspected rebels. They had swept through my

village twice already. My farmhouse was small and miles away from the town proper, so they had thankfully overlooked me. I lived alone and walked along a narrow road through the thick woods to the village only when I needed to replenish my supplies. After each wave of soldiers, there was far less for me to choose from. They took everything they needed and terrified the people, making examples by beating the men and doing far worse to the women.

Returning from one of these trips early in the afternoon on the first day of the month, I carried my large bag of finds to the cellar behind our farmhouse where I hoarded my supplies. They dropped into the darkness with a muffled thud and I shut the door, reapplying the layer of snow I used to hide it. No one, friend or foe, ever came near my house, but it did not hurt to be careful. My brothers and I were hard workers, and we had amassed a generous supply of grain, salted meats, wool, cloth, and other useful odds and ends to trade in town.

I trudged through the fresh snow back to the house and removed my boots. They were large men's boots and they matched the shirts, coat, trousers, and overcoat I had taken to wearing since my brothers left. The men's clothes were both warmer and more practical. Dresses dragged in the snow and hindered me when I gathered firewood or hunted.

I went to my bedroom and picked up my looking glass. The looking glass had cost me a whole live hen, and I regretted the trade as soon as I returned home and saw myself in it. My brothers would have never let me make such a foolish trade if they had been alive. Once again I stared at my reflection. My hair was braided behind me, furiously matted. I picked it up and dropped it disdainfully. I got up and left.

I returned a moment later with wool sheers. I leaned the looking glass against the wall behind my desk and sat down before it. I took a deep breath, grabbed a lock, and cut it off. I

repeated the process until the floor was littered with bunches of long hairs and my head felt a good five pounds lighter. I poured some water from the pitcher into the bowl beside my bed and then wet my hair, smoothing it down. I looked back into my looking glass.

I frowned. A boy, not yet a man, frowned back at me. I sighed. It was done. I had sacrificed my final vanity in the name of practicality. I put my boots back on, grabbed my hatchet, and walked outside. I was low on firewood.

At first, the thump of hatchet hitting wood hid the sounds of horses galloping on snow. Then I heard it. A hot panic started in my stomach and quickly moved up to my face, which flushed out of fear and surprise. I quickly shouldered my hatchet and ran to a denser part of the forest, farther from the path.

A girl on a white horse flew past, her yellow braid whipping back behind her. Seconds later, a man in a Russian soldier's uniform followed swiftly behind her. They both disappeared from view. A few moments passed, and then a gunshot rang out. The Russian and his horse returned, trotting this time. He mumbled and spat under his breath, and I could pick out a few Russian swear words. I waited a while, and then set off to find the girl or her horse or both. I hoped to find something worth salvaging on her person.

I followed the hoof prints that were quickly being covered by snow. In a clearing, I saw her crumpled form. I approached cautiously, then took her by the shoulder and turned her so she was lying on her back. She breathed.

Startled, I quickly swung my axe above my head. I could tell by her clothes that she was no peasant. She was someone. Someone important. She would be missed. They would be looking

for her. I knew that logically, I should kill her. Her clothes alone were worth about as much as my house. She could cause trouble for me, I thought. The last place that soldier saw her was here, practically in my back yard. I let out a breath that clouded in front of my mouth and slowly lowered my axe. I could not do it.

At that breath her eyes fluttered open and she let out a yelp before slapping her hands over her mouth. Then she looked at me a little closer.

“You’re a woman!” she sighed, relieved. “I thought you were a man.”

I frowned, more than a little hurt, before I remembered my haircut.

“Have you been shot?” I asked.

“Oh, no,” she replied. She looked down. “He must have shot the horse. I jumped off and he followed the horse instead of me.”

“Clever,” I said. I stayed quiet for a moment and stared at her as she picked herself up off the ground and delicately brushed the snow off of her dress with long, slender fingers. Her golden hair was coming out of her lengthy braid in a few places, but it was not unpleasant. She lifted her eyes, which were colored a warm, nutty hazel, to meet mine before I quickly looked away.

“It was actually not that clever,” she laughed a little tinkling, bell-like laugh. “I fell off. Then I rolled sideways off the path as fast as I could. I had saddle bags... I’m Annabelle.”

“The soldier had them,” I recalled to her, shaking my head. I did not care what her name was. I turned away from her and started toward my farmhouse.

“Where are you going?” she called to me.

“Home. I wish you luck with whatever it is you are doing.”

“Wait! You live near here? Can you help me?”

I turned around to face her.

“There is nothing I can do for you.”

“But there is!” she pleaded. “And I can help you too. We’re both on our own. Maybe we’ll have any easier time surviving together.”

“How do you know I’m alone?”

“You’re out here gathering firewood. If there was a man in the house, he would be doing it. If you had children you would not leave them alone, and anyway you’re too young to have children already. Please.”

“You want to stay in my house?” I asked her, bewildered. “You don’t know me! And it’s winter. I barely have enough food to keep myself alive, and you want me to split that in half for you?”

“I can help you find more. I have a little bit of money and we can sell my clothes. Please, I’ll work hard! Just give me a chance!”

Thinking, I looked at her and chewed on my lip. Her clothes and money would be useful. I doubted then that she herself would be, but I also couldn’t see how she would be that much of a burden either. She was small and couldn’t eat much. It had also been a very long time since I had someone to talk to who was not trying to oversell me on cheap goods.

“You can stay. For a couple of days, maybe. We’ll see.”

“Oh, thank you! You won’t regret it. Now, tell me your name.”

“Marie.”

“Marie! Let’s get going.”

“Hmph.”

“Steady,” I whispered.

I turned to look at Annabelle, who was holding a rifle and closing one of her eyes. The sights were trained on a large black boar that was sniffing the ground. She bit her lip and pulled the trigger. The boar roared in pain, ran a few paces, then stumbled to the ground. Annabelle gave a surprised and triumphant yelp as I ran toward the boar. It was breathing shallowly and still moving around. Annabelle joined me at its side and I handed her my knife.

“What’s this for?”

“You have to cut its throat.”

“No!”

“Yes! This is part of the deal! If you want to learn to hunt you’ll have to get your hands dirty. It isn’t all just stalking and shooting. Do it quickly so we can take it home and start preparing it.”

“Can’t you do it? I’ll do it next time!”

“No.”

She reluctantly grabbed the knife and edged up to the boar. She grabbed its ear and, closing her eyes, drew the knife quickly across its throat. A final squeal was heard, and then we had the makings our dinner. Together we carried it home and then I began to prepare some of it for that night, putting the rest aside to be salted and preserved.

“Can you teach me how to cook, too?” she asked, a little shyly.

I pulled a bloody intestine from inside of the boar and grinned to myself as steam rose from it into the cold December afternoon air.

“You sure you want to?”

“Oh!” she gasped. “Maybe not... What are you doing?”

“I was going to make sausages for dinner tonight.”

Annabelle had been living in my home for two weeks. The first few days were a quiet affair, with her gingerly exploring my house, trying not to get in my way, and me not knowing in the slightest how to speak to someone like her. On the fourth day I found her in my father’s old room, reading out of a book that had belonged to my uncle, who was a priest. She looked up when I entered the room.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to pry,” she said. “It’s been such a long time since I’ve gotten a chance to read anything.”

“What is it?” I asked. She showed me the spine, which displayed the title in large letters. I blushed. “I still don’t know what it is...”

“You can’t read?”

“Why would I need to?” I scowled at her.



“I’m sorry,” she said. “You’re right. You’ve got many other, much more important skills. You’re much better equipped than I am, actually.”

She looked down, then back up at me.

“Would you like to learn how to read? I could teach you, if you’ll teach me some things. Then I can stop being a burden to you and be on my way.”

I thought about it for a moment. I had always wanted to know how to read. My mother and father had thought it pointless, but if I could have just spelled out my own name I would have felt a little less green, a little more sophisticated.

“Alright,” I finally said.

After Annabelle and I struck our deal, I found it hard to let go of her. I worked diligently at learning and she was very patient with me. I think in another life she would have made an excellent teacher. And though I was not nearly as patient with her, she learned quickly what I had to teach as well. She could prepare simple meals, mend clothes, and build fires. Her real talent, however, was hunting and skinning. She turned out to be an excellent shot, and could maneuver the hide off of a buck or a boar without a single strip of extra flesh sticking to it. She still could not have made it on her own without my help. But I couldn’t remember how I had made it without hers.

We got into the habit of talking every night by the fire, after all the work was done. We talked all about our lives before the war, and we smoked from my father’s pipe. She finally explained the business with the Russian.

“My father was chosen as a general,” she told me as she took a puff. “He didn’t really want to fight, but you can’t exactly say no. He’s in a prison in St. Petersburg now. The soldiers came to my house while I was out riding. They killed most of our servants. I came back just in time to see them drag my mother out of the house. I turned right back around and rode as fast and as far as I could, with that awful brute chasing me. I think about it all the time. Whenever I’m not busy enough. She looked so frightened. I can’t forget her face. Do you think I’m awful for leaving my mother?”

She looked up at me, the fire reflecting in her very damp eyes.

“Of course not!” I said. “What could you have done to help her?”

She put her hand to her cheek.

“I could have gone with her,” her voice shook, and the threat of tears became a reality. “We could have faced it together. I’m such a coward!”

“It isn’t cowardly to go off on your own. You didn’t give up. You didn’t let them take you. And look at you now!”

She laughed a wet kind of laugh, full of the relief that comes after a good cry.

“I should hate for my mother to see me now! Dirty, working, and look at these!” She lifted up her sleeve and flexed her arm, displaying a rather respectable bulge at the bicep. I laughed with her.

“My father,” she said quietly. “Would be proud, I think. He always encouraged me to try more robust activities. He did not want me to become too soft and out of touch.”

“It’s good you’ve got me, then,” I said. I blew three successive smoke rings, each more unshapely than the next. “I think it’s time we go to sleep though.”

The survivalist nature of my existence before Annabelle transformed rapidly into something very different. I looked forward to waking up in the morning, reading and doing chores with her, and I was sad to end our conversations and go to bed each night. I once again felt like I was human. Like I was part of the world. Even more so now that I could read a little and connect to authors from far off places and very different times.

We realized, after about four weeks working and living together, that it must be around Christmas time.

“What shall we do to celebrate?” I asked Annabelle.

“Well, we shouldn’t have any trouble with the Christmas Eve Fast.”

“Your family did that too? I thought it was only us peasants, to save food.”

“It’s a tradition. No need to get smart.”

“I suppose we can stick to tradition, and save our appetite for a great feast tonight.”

“I’ll go on a hunt!”

“No, you’ve done enough of that. I’ll hunt; you can search through the cellar for something to cook alongside it.”

“You’ve never let me into the cellar before!”

“Well Merry Christmas.”

We parted ways and I grabbed the rifle and pulled on my coat. It had begun snowing. As I marched along the trail into the woods, the snow picked up and grew into a bit of a storm. It wasn't quite so bad that I couldn't see to shoot, but it was getting there. The snow blew into my coat and fell into my boots, soaking my socks. I shivered. My face turned pink and raw from the wind blowing snowflakes into it, and soon I couldn't feel it at all. I knew I would have to turn around and return home soon.

Just as I was about to give up, I spotted a large dark form a ways in front of me. I trained my rifle onto it and shut one eye, but I wasn't sure I could make the shot. Slowly and carefully, I took one step, then another, closer to the creature. I raised my rifle once again, but before I could pull the trigger, I heard a click.

"Put down the gun," a rough voice said from behind me, with a thick Russian accent. I slowly lowered my rifle onto the snow.

"Turn around." I faced him. He held the finest pistol I had ever seen, pointed directly at my head. A large, black mustache stretched across his face. His stubbled chin jutted out below his very red, spit-soaked lips, twisted into a sick smile. A tuft of black hair fell out from his cap, which was slightly crooked. His eyes were as black and merciless as a wild boar's.

"You are not her," he said. "Where is she?"

I stayed silent.

"I'll shoot!" he said, moving closer to me and shoving the gun in my face.

I still said nothing. His black eyes gleamed, and his teeth showed under his mustache, as he swiftly raised the gun and brought it down onto my face. I cried out, as it smashed my eye and

cheek and split my lip. I started bleeding from several places on my face. I spat red onto the snow.

“One more chance,” he said. I looked up at him. Seemingly out of nowhere, an arm came from behind him and grabbed his chest. His eyes grew large and the smile left his face. A hand came from the other side and slid a large knife quickly across his throat. He stood for a second, and coughed, clutching at his open neck. He fell to his knees, then to the ground on his front. Annabelle stood behind him, panting, holding a very bloody knife. She looked up at me, and smiled.

I was finally able to breathe and so took a few great gasping breaths. I doubled over with my hands on my knees and looked at the soldier. Blood was slowly creeping out from him, staining the white ground red centimeter by centimeter. It was beautiful.

“Come on,” I said hoarsely. “Let’s see what he’s got.”

Annabelle nodded and we knelt down to search the body. We took his gun, some trinkets and coins, and ultimately stripped him of his uniform.

“What should we do with the body?” Annabelle asked.”

“We’ll worry about that tomorrow,” I said. “It’s Christmas.”