

The Smell Collector

It must be here. *Repulsive*. (He would have said.)

With its gangrene-hued brick façade and weary windows, the building resembles one of those Polish store-downstairs houses on Milwaukee Avenue in Chicago. But the address is right: *Next to the Pol-Am Travel*.

(He smokes, so . . .)

He stubs out a cigarette (he'd have finished a pack by now) and peers into the foyer: broken glass on the floor, dead leaves, a pile of junk mail in the corner. A bulky sign, *Don't tamper with the lock, morons!* hangs on the inner door, on its tempered sash.

And the smell in there! The cloying whiff of kielbasa. Or *bigos*. Or fried bacon. Just like in Polish Chicago or his Silesia. He despised those smells, those neighborhoods. Still, he enters.

(Maybe she'd told him there would be her name next to the buzzer.)

He puts on his glasses, holds the door for light. Two old-fashioned mailboxes are set into the wall, lids jagged, intercom holes stuffed with . . .

(What would he have thought they were?)

Must be those 'Get a Green Card and a Honeymoon' flyers.

A swarm of by-names crowds the two mole-ish buttons, each pressed onto a strip of faded plastic, the letters raised in ghostly relief. *Pszczółka. Rój*. He traces them slowly, like Braille. *Miodecka & Bartek Bartnicki* (*ring twice*). His finger folds back into his fist.

There's also a large pocket box on the wall, graphite black, with a

golden eagle and trumpet painted on the front. *The Nosegay, Inc.* No buzzer, though.

He hesitates, re-reads the (broken-Polish) ad: *Smells collector help you to float in aroma from your happy times again!*

He reaches the inside doorknob through the cracked glass pane and pushes the door open.

“Miss Lebowicz?” he calls from the landing.

(The building has a couple of, perhaps, twin apartments above the travel agency.)

The door to one is marked with dents, as if forced more than once. A heavy lock, a crude metal plate bolted into the wood. The other opens wide, suddenly, with a prompt, confident swing.

A young woman in a short, loose tunic—or nearly nothing—leans on the banister.

“You must be . . . *Pan* Nowak?”

They’re both startled.

(She would have been; my father and I are look-alike.)

She waits for a nod. (Maybe.) Maybe she smiles.

His eyes crawl, not to hers but up the long white stocking, then down again.

“Sorry. A mistake,” he stammers, lifting the newspaper roll. “The ad. I read the ad and thought . . . I don’t know why, really. I’m sorry, Ms. Lebowicz. I expected a flower shop here.”

“But of course,” she says in Polish—perhaps teasing, perhaps just that thick American accent. “And you are *not* Mister Kowalski, who called me yesterday.”

But he’s already downstairs, running through the squalor, the glass, the feter, and out into the vitals of Polish Greenpoint.