

The tram skidded a few extra paces before it screeched to an angry halt. Natan Borkowski jumped on board the tram with his fellow students, relieved to escape the pouring rain that started as they left school.

The conductor looked disapprovingly at the group of two dozen boys piling into the car, instantly fogging the windows.

“You boys better show me your tickets, or you’re off before the next stop,” he said menacingly as he shuffled down the car.

Natan grinned as he brushed the rain from his jacket—Warsaw tram conductors were hired for their moodiness. He rubbed the fog off the window and looked out at fellow Varsovians huddled close to the colorful, majestic buildings of the Old Town—overhanging roofs provided just enough escape from the raindrops clattering down. The streetcar clanged its bell as a horse-drawn carriage blocked the intersection, its driver shouting obscenities at the soaked beast.

As they made their way out of the city center, the car emptied until it was only Natan and a handful of others. He enjoyed the rhythmic drumming of the wheels as they crossed the Vistula River. On a typical summer day, the river would be dotted with an eclectic mix of small

pleasure vessels and riverboats ferrying tourists. Today, only a few old river barges struggled through the surprisingly high waves.

Natan skipped off at the next stop, careful not to slip on the cobblestones. The rain was still coming down hard, and he jogged the last two blocks along the deserted streets to Borkowski Leather Works in record time. A tattered old sign that creaked in the rain betrayed the factory's purpose; he entered the yard through the broad archway between two large houses. On either side of the space, workers hauled overloaded pallets toward two trucks. Natan spotted the drivers having a smoke under shelter, oblivious to the men outside getting soaked.

*Papa better not see them standing around doing nothing*, he thought with a chuckle.

He crossed the yard, the muddy ground tugging at his shoes. When he opened the door to the factory, the sweet smell of new leather filled his nostrils. Natan brushed most of the mud off his shoes as he entered the factory. Even though the floor wasn't spotless—it was a factory, after all—his father was a stickler about bringing in dirt.

He ascended the stairs to the offices and waved at some of the men on the floor below—the hum of the machines drowning out their hoots. Natan opened the door to the offices, momentarily interrupting the silence—it always struck him how quiet it was, compared to the constant cacophony of the factory floor.

Natan headed straight for his father's office, nodding at the other clerks in the main room. Jan Borkowski stood near the window of his office. He appeared deep in thought, and Natan cleared his throat. His father turned and gave him a measured smile.

"Do you see that?" His father pointed at the trucks in the yard. "Where do you think the drivers are? I don't see them anywhere."

Natan suppressed a smile. "Probably taking a break."

"No, no. I've checked a few times now, and all I see is our men coming out of the factory, loading box after box, but the drivers are nowhere to be seen. Lazy bums. I'll have a word before they head out. How was school?"

Natan shrugged. "You know, like any first week back, although it's

nice to be a senior since there's no one left to push us around. What would you like me to work on today?"

His father raised an eyebrow as he sat down behind his large mahogany desk. "Got somewhere else to be?"

"No, it's fine," he said with little enthusiasm. *Maybe I can join my friends later this evening.*

His father handed him a thick folder. "Process these invoices and let me know when you're done. I'll have some more work for you by then."

Natan sighed inwardly. *This is going to take a while—better get on with it.* Turning toward his desk, he saw Kasia Nowak walk in—her face creased with worry as she brushed past him.

"Mr. Borkowski, I was preparing the paperwork for the shipment downstairs, but we're missing the final approval from customs," she said, her voice an octave higher than usual. Natan stopped at the door.

His father stared at his assistant and offered a frown. "How is that possible? I signed that form over a month ago."

Kasia nodded, concern in her eyes. "And I remember marking these to be mailed out right after. I called customs, and they have no record of receiving our request. It must've been lost along the way."

Mr. Borkowski slumped back in his chair. "Can we get them to expedite? This is our biggest shipment of the year. We can't have any delays."

"They said we need to refile, and then they'll process it in due time," she said, quickly adding, "their exact words."

Natan felt his stomach turn. He knew what they were talking about—those papers were still on his desk.

His father got up, grabbed his coat, and made for the door. "If we wait for them to go through their usual process it'll take another two weeks. We can't wait that long; they're almost done loading up the trucks." He pointed at the window. "I'll go down there myself and get this fixed."

He stormed out of the office, leaving Kasia and Natan behind.

Natan was turning to leave when Kasia's voice cut through the silence. "Natan."

He turned back hesitantly.

“Did you forget to deliver those papers to the post office?” Her voice was soft, but her eyes bored into him.

He nodded. “They’re on my desk, but you already knew that, didn’t you?”

“I did, but your father has enough to worry about as it is.”

Kasia looked more disappointed than angry, which only made him feel worse. “Is there anything I can do to make this right?”

“Yes,” she said as she walked toward the door. “Go with your father. I doubt there’s much you can do, but he’ll appreciate having you there.” Mr. Borkowski was already storming down the stairs, and Natan headed for the door. “Should I tell him?”

“That’s up to you, but don’t just stand around here.”

Natan sprinted down the stairs, catching up with his father as the driver closed the back door of his father’s car. He opened the door himself and sat down next to his father in the back seat. His father looked surprised to see him.

“I’d like to help, Papa.”

★

The customs office was bustling with activity as the Borkowskis entered the crowded waiting room. Simple wooden chairs lined the walls, each taken and another half dozen people standing around. Two clerks sat behind modest desks on the far side of the room, surrounded by filing cabinets. They looked bored as they rummaged through the paperwork.

“They don’t look like they’re too bothered,” his father mumbled, his cheeks reddening a little.

One of the men standing nearby overheard him. “Oh no, they have all the time in the world,” he said with a thick accent from somewhere south of Warsaw.

Mr. Borkowski looked around impatiently, scanning the room. “How long have you been waiting?” he asked without looking at the man.

“Over two hours.”

Natan checked the time. It was almost four. *They’ll be clocking out in an hour sharp, no doubt.*

“Let’s go,” his father said as he crossed into the hallway and turned toward the staircase.

“Where are we going?” His father took the steps two at a time, and Natan struggled to keep up with him.

“There’s no sense waiting for those clerks. I know someone who can help us right now.”

They entered a narrow hallway on the second floor, where it was noticeably quieter. A young woman shuffled past them without as much as a glance. His father marched down the hallway before stopping in front of one of the closed doors. He rapped his knuckles loudly.

A groan came from the other side, and Mr. Borkowski opened the door. They stepped into a cramped office filled with filing cabinets. Squeezed in between was a simple desk with a small, stout man seated behind it, his hair combed over in a futile effort to conceal his bald crown.

The man stood and drew a sappy smile. “Mr. Borkowski, what an unexpected surprise.” His voice dripped with irony as he emphasized the last word.

Natan’s father didn’t return the smile, although he shook the man’s outstretched hand. “It appears there’s a problem in your organization, Anton,” he said curtly.

Anton waved him to the only other chair in the room, leaving Natan hovering around awkwardly.

“What seems to be the problem?” Anton said as he sat down. The old office chair squeaked as he readjusted himself.

“I can’t have my largest shipment of the year sitting around for another two weeks,” he said with determination, his cheeks flushed. Natan hardly recognized his father like this; he was generally calm and composed.

Anton sat shaking his head, a deep frown creasing his face. One of the longer strands of hair threatened to slide out of position, but he managed to catch it just in time. “I’m sorry about this, we rarely lose paperwork around here. But if you’ve been advised to reapply, there’s very little else the department can do. You’ll have to wait,” he offered. Natan winced at his insincere tone.

“Well, that’s simply not an option for me. I can’t explain this to my German customer. He’s expecting the boots this week.”

Anton held up his palms and said nothing—silence hung in the air.

*He wants something.*

After a moment, Natan’s father leaned forward. “Say, Anton. I know *the department* can’t do anything for me, but is there any chance you could do me a personal favor?”

An unmistakable twinkle of greed appeared in Anton’s ratty eyes as he lowered his voice. “Well, the issue is with the border patrols between Germany and Poland these days. You know how it is—people are nervous. Last I heard, soldiers were crawling about on both sides. We need to grease the wheels of the machine a little, if you know what I mean?”

Jan Borkowski nodded. “How much?”

The man scribbled a number on a piece of paper and slid it across the small desk. Natan saw his father’s shoulders tense.

Mr. Borkowski stood up, stuffing the piece of paper in his pocket. “And this will get it done?”

“Absolutely,” Anton said, getting up as well. The small man’s demeanor had changed—now he was eager to help. “I will take care of it myself, and the papers will be in order within a few hours.”

His father’s eyes lingered a fraction longer than necessary on Anton, who shifted on his feet. “Then I’ll have the money delivered to you tomorrow morning,” Mr. Borkowski said, “and I expect to have the papers in time for my men to start driving tomorrow afternoon.” Anton turned back to his work as father and son quickly left the office.

Back in the car, Natan couldn’t contain his curiosity any longer.

“How much does he want?”

“Too much.” His father handed him the crumpled piece of paper and tapped the seat to signal the driver. “Factory,” he said.

*Six thousand zloty.* Natan swallowed hard—that was enough to pay all the men in the factory for a month. He looked outside the car as Warsaw’s wet, slippery streets slid by. Even though it was only late afternoon, rain clouds hung overhead, casting a wet, gray blanket over the city. *Should I tell him?* Natan had been careless with the papers, and he remembered

pushing them aside on his desk when he'd left that particular afternoon over a month ago. He'd been too anxious to get out of the office to meet his friends, and he had then simply forgotten about it. He glanced at his father, who looked like he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"You know, if we don't get this shipment out this month, we'll have to shut the factory down for a while," Jan said as he gazed through the window. In the Old Town area, the small streets meant the traffic moved slower. Their driver honked at a group of pedestrians blocking their way.

"But if you pay that customs man, we should be okay, right?"

His father nodded slowly. "Yes, but I don't have that kind of cash."

Natan pondered his response before asking, "Do you think it has something to do with the recent German-Soviet treaty?"

"I'm sure it's because of that, and, for what it's worth, I think Anton will have to use quite a bit of that money to secure the passage of our trucks."

"Can't you take out a loan with the bank?"

Jan didn't answer immediately but soon turned toward Natan.

"I can't. We've already overextended our credit. This shipment is our lifeline." In the semidarkness of the car, Natan could see his eyes glisten.

The traffic moved again, and they turned onto one of the larger thoroughways, heading toward the Vistula. His father spoke to the driver. "Max, change of plans. Let's drop Natan off at home, then head to Ochota."

Max nodded and merged to the left lane, quickly overtaking the other cars.

Natan was surprised. "Where are you going?"

His father gave him a weak smile. "To take care of this problem."

"I want to go with you."

"Out of the question—you're going to do your homework and have dinner with your mother. I'll be back a little later."

Natan wanted to protest, but his father silenced him with a stern look. "I don't want you anywhere near the people I'm meeting. You're going home, and that's final."

Natan opened his mouth, but his father had turned away. He caught Max's gaze in the rearview mirror, and the man shook his head almost

imperceptibly. There was little sense arguing with his father. Natan brooded silently for the rest of the ride.

They stopped in front of their house. As Natan opened the door, his father placed a hand on his shoulder. "Not a word of this to your mother. Tell her I'm taking care of an errand at the office, okay?"

Natan nodded and got out. As the car sped away, he stood in the rain for a minute, cursing himself.

**T**ry as she might, Julia Horowitz found it impossible to get back to sleep. She could hear her mother shuffling plates and cutlery in the kitchen, and she glanced at the clock on her tiny bedside cabinet—half past five. Finally, she sighed, surrendered, and swung her legs out of bed.

The two other beds in the small room were vacant, which meant the rest of the family was already at the breakfast table. She quickly dressed and joined them.

“Look who finally decided to get up as well,” her brother Olek said, grinning. He spoke in Yiddish, as they all did at home.

She shot him a look but didn’t say anything. *Why bother.*

Their mother placed a small skillet of scrambled eggs in the middle of the table, and Olek and her father scooped most of it onto their plates. Julia and her mother waited until they finished before taking what little remained for them to share.

The little room doubled as a kitchen and living room. Julia nibbled at her eggs and took a small piece of dark rye bread—already stale, but she didn’t complain. Her mother did her best to make sure there was something to eat at least twice a day. On the Sabbath, they would have a hearty but straightforward midday meal as well. She glanced at Lea Horowitz, who was eating quietly, her eyes focused on her plate.

As Olek scraped the final pieces of egg from the pan, Julia took a deep breath and turned to her father. "Papa, there's an exciting project at school today."

Wojtek Horowitz looked up from his plate with a frown. He preferred breakfast to be a quiet time.

"There's a selection round for an extra class on law," Julia said, speaking quickly before her father could silence her.

Olek interrupted. "A class on law? What's that to you?" A few crumbs of bread flew from his mouth.

*Why must you be such a pig?* Julia grimaced, ignoring her older brother and turning her eyes toward her mother. "I've been selected to apply. Mr. Lewandowski says I would be a great student."

Her father wiped his mouth and said, "Why would a girl need to learn anything about the law?"

She tried to hide her disappointment—he sounded annoyed. She had anticipated this and swallowed before responding.

"Papa, you know I'd like to be a lawyer when I'm older, right? I'd really like to—"

He silenced her with a quick hand gesture. "What time is this class?"

"Right after the morning classes, at one."

Wojtek shook his head resolutely. "Out of the question. I need you in the shop." He returned his attention to his plate. That was the end of the matter for him.

Olek looked across the table with glee, and Julia felt her frustration growing. She turned to her mother, who also shook her head.

She couldn't resist another try. "But Papa, the man teaching the class works for one of the biggest law firms in the whole of Poland!" *Why doesn't he understand?* "I've worked so hard for this!"

Her father's head shot up quicker than she'd expected. The annoyance gave way to anger as he put his fork down with a clang. "Julia Horowitz, I don't care for your tone. You won't question me. The law is nothing for a girl, and certainly not a Jewish girl like you. Your teacher should know better than to encourage it."

Her cheeks burned with indignation. Olek's grin was only widening. She wanted to punch him.

Wojtek Horowitz wasn't done. "Look around. Who do you think you are, chasing silly academic dreams? You should take after your brother. He's got a steady job, he's helping put food on the table. The very least you can do is help out in the shop."

It was true. Olek, two years her senior at 18, had recently dropped out of his last year at school to find a job in construction. He was contributing a large amount of his salary toward the very meal they were having now. And her father had a point—she had bigger aspirations than to become someone's wife and wither away as her mother had. She immediately regretted her thoughts as she looked at Lea, whose eyes were sad—silently pleading with her to stop.

Julia glared at her brother and nodded. "Okay, Papa, I understand. I'll come straight back after school."

She silently finished her breakfast.

★

Julia's best friend, Helena, was waiting for her outside the school. She raised her eyebrows as Julia came closer and smiled cautiously as they made their way up the stairs.

"What's wrong?" she asked without preamble.

Julia waved it off. "Nothing—just my father."

They hurried through the crowded hallway, avoiding the other kids rushing to their first classes.

"Come on, what happened this time?"

Julia sighed. "He won't let me go to the law class today. He says it's not for girls, especially Jewish ones."

"But you must go!" Helena exclaimed as she stopped abruptly in the middle of the hallway. The other kids glided past them as she turned to Julia, her face serious. "You're the only girl invited, and you're probably the smartest person in the room there."

Julia pulled on her friend's arm. "Come on, we're going to be late for math."

"Never mind math. This is a big chance, Julia. You have to go."

She smiled at Helena. "Okay, okay, I'll go."

Helena looked triumphant as they took their seats at the back of the classroom. Of course, there would be trouble waiting when she got to her father's shop. *I'll worry about that later.* She opened her textbook and tried to focus on algebra.

★

After lunch, Julia walked into the classroom set aside for the law class and was surprised to find she wasn't the first student there. She scanned the faces, all of them boys, for one that was familiar. Mr. Lewandowski sat behind the desk in the front. He glanced up, saw her, and stood as she came near.

"I'm glad you decided to come," he said softly, as the boys around them chatted, oblivious to Julia. "I think this will be perfect for you, and I'd like to see more girls pursuing a career in law." He winked at her.

Mr. Lewandowski always encouraged her to follow her dreams. When he'd asked her what she wanted to become at the start of the year, she'd been hesitant to share her ambitions. He pushed her, and that's why she was here today.

"Thank you," she said, scanning the room. "The lawyer's not here yet?"

Mr. Lewandowski shook his head. "He's a busy man, and from what I know, extremely punctual. He'll probably show up right on—ah, there he is!"

A tall man confidently entered the room. He wore a fine suit and had an expensive-looking raincoat draped over his arm. As he passed the desks, his eyes were focused on Mr. Lewandowski, approaching him with enormous, purposeful strides. They shook hands, and the man put down his leather briefcase.

Mr. Lewandowski introduced him as Mr. Kaminski. His gaze lingered on Julia a little longer, and she offered a smile he ignored. Then, finally, after what felt like a full minute of silence, he spoke.

"It's great to see such a large interest in the fine craft of the law," he said without enthusiasm, his voice a monotone baritone that sounded like a hum. "In the next few hours, I hope we can select the best students for my firm's internship." He looked serious as he wrote a few words on the

chalkboard behind him. "I'll start with a short introduction about what we expect from you and what the course is like. Then, you'll all write a short essay detailing why you should be accepted into the course." He looked around the room. "Any questions?"

Silence.

Mr. Kaminski clapped his hands together. "Excellent. Then I'll start with a question for you. Who here has any experience with the law?"

No hands went up. For a moment, Mr. Kaminski looked disappointed, but he quickly recovered. "Anybody who knows someone working for the law?"

One of the boys raised his hand. "I know a policeman."

Mr. Kaminski smiled dismissively. "Very well, but that's not what I'm looking for. Anybody else?"

Nobody could come up with even a far-fetched connection to someone working in the esteemed field of law. Julia was unsure if she liked Mr. Kaminski very much. He then launched into a droning description of the inner workings of the law. Or, more specifically, his courtroom victories. He seemed to love the sound of his voice; his lecture went on for more than an hour. Julia glanced around the room and saw most of the other students' heads drooping. She stifled a yawn of her own. *How much longer is he going to be?*

When he mercifully finished his lecture, the air in the room felt heavy, and they took a short break. She was glad to get a bit of fresh air outside before returning—determined to ace the essay part.

Mr. Lewandowski handed out the papers while the lawyer offered instructions. They were required to write about the defense of a fictional case. "Make sure you're concise. We don't like wordiness."

For the next hour and a half, the classroom was silent but for the occasional rustling of paper. Then, when it was time to hand in their essays, Mr. Lewandowski quickly glanced at Julia's small pile of papers. He nodded approvingly at her neatly written words.

As everyone filed out of the room, Mr. Kaminski was placing the essays in his briefcase. Julia gathered up the courage to approach him.

"Excuse me," she said, keeping a distance.

He looked up with the same impassive face he'd had throughout most of the class. "Yes?"

"I wanted to thank you for the interesting class. Can I ask you something about your firm?"

He closed his briefcase and nodded. "What would you like to know?" He looked like he was in a hurry, and Julia feared she was keeping him.

"How many lawyers work there?"

He thought briefly and answered. "There are about 20 of us."

"Are any of them women?"

"No," Mr. Kaminski said immediately. "We have plenty of women working as assistants and receptionists, but none are lawyers." He snorted a little, and a frown appeared as it dawned on him. "You want to become a lawyer?"

Julia nodded and opened her mouth to reply, but he cut her off.

"Let me tell you something. I haven't read your essay yet, and I'm sure you've tried your best, but I'm going to be honest. There's no chance we'll take on girls—it's simply not a job for women, certainly not in our firm."

She stood silent, stunned.

He wasn't done yet. "I noticed your name on the class list earlier. It's Horowitz, right?"

Julia nodded and said nothing. She knew where this was going.

"Jewish girl, then." She thought his frown couldn't become any deeper, yet it did. "I can't imagine your parents are happy about your ambitions." It wasn't a question, and he only paused long enough to pick up his briefcase with a sigh.

Julia felt her eyes sting but was determined not to show how much his words hurt. She swallowed hard and tried to keep her composure. "I understand," she said softly.

Mr. Kaminski grunted something unintelligible as he turned away from the desk. Then, he strode toward the door, leaving Julia in front of the classroom on her own.

She took quick steps through the narrow streets adjacent to Nalewki Street. The sun was doing its best to break through the clouds overhead; it did little to lift Julia's spirits. She kept her head down, and she prayed she wouldn't run into anyone she knew.

The lawyer's words had shaken her more than she cared to admit. Julia knew she was dreaming above her station—daughter of a simple shoemaker, after all—but nobody had ever told her in such bold terms. Well, her father and brother did their best to belittle her at every opportunity, but she had decided not to pay too much attention to them a long time ago.

When she had stepped into the classroom earlier, she'd felt energized, ready to take her chance. A door had opened, only for Mr. Kaminski to slam it shut only hours later.

She reached a busy intersection and paused for the traffic. A streetcar raced by, clanging its bells loudly as two street urchins crossed dangerously close. The people around her were busy doing their afternoon shopping, frequenting the small shops lining Nalewki. She passed her favorite store on the street, Elbaum Ladies' Clothing. Even though she'd never dared set foot inside, she loved to gawk at the luxurious clothing in the shop window. Julia stopped and noticed they were changing the dress display. She caught her reflection in the shop window, and her tattered shoes stared back. She sighed and walked on.

Julia neared her home, her father's workshop on the ground floor. The rusted signboard hung overhead really ought to be replaced or removed. Her father didn't seem to care—he said his customers were loyal and knew how to find him, regardless of the sign.

Julia stepped into the little shop that smelled of shoe polish and leather. She was glad to find her father occupied with a customer, and she squeezed past the man, her father giving her a thunderous glare. She quickly made her way to the small storeroom in the back, where she picked up a broom and started sweeping dirt out onto the pavement. As she stepped into the street, she suddenly felt a jolt of indignation rise up. *Who do these men think they are, telling me I won't make it? One day, I'll prove them wrong.*