

# Hate

Sonya felt the hate for Wasek rise up within her, sudden and strong--as strong as Wasek's own hatreds but with more reason. She wondered at this feeling, so foreign to her nature yet so palpable she could taste it, like a bitter almond. Only moments ago she had been anticipating another spring day with pleasure. Now, everything was tainted. Tears, held back by the more potent feeling of hate, welled up and spilled down her cheeks. If only she had left the canary in the cage yesterday...

She took the cloth cover off the cage and watched with pleasure as the small yellow bird greeted her with fluttering wings. "Soon you will be singing your beautiful songs," Sonya said as she filled the little feeding trough with seed and put fresh water in the glass tube. "I will change the newspaper for you when Wasek finishes with today's edition."

There was a frown upon her thin face as she thought about Wasek Wisniewski, her husband of 22 years. Every day he would come home from the tavern where he worked grumbling over some real or imagined insult, ranting over an encounter with a neighbor, tradesman or merchant with whom he did business, fuming about the Jews or the colored people. How could one man be filled with so many hatreds? It was as if he were nourished by them, like a fly in a dung heap. She could not understand why.

The canary began to sing, and although the day was overcast, to Sonya it was as if sunlight had filled the small kitchen. She loved the little yellow bird. She loved the beautiful trills it made as it sang. On Saturdays, she always tuned in to the canary show on the radio knowing that her own canary, which she called Little Love, would join in. Of course, Wasek thought that she was mad to have all that "noise," and forbade her to have the cage uncovered when he was home. Fortunately, he spent most of each day at work.

Sonya put a kettle of water on the gas stove and stared out the small kitchen window, now raised a little to allow the fresh Spring air into the house. The old neighborhood was changing once again, she thought. How different it was when she and Wasek had first moved in. Uncle Dabro had presented Wasek with the keys to this house shortly after their arrival in America from Warsaw. In 1928 it was. Uncle Dabro had paid for their passage because Wasek was his only living relative, and he wanted him to help run his prospering tavern. Of course, Wasek was only too happy to comply. For a newly married man of 21 whose prospects in Warsaw were none too grand, Wasek thought it was an astounding piece of good fortune. Sonya had agreed.

The neighborhood then--at least this block of Clara Avenue--had been made up of Polish families. When you went into the church on the corner, Sonya remembered, it was easy to imagine you were still in Warsaw. Even the corner grocery was stocked with all the "old country" delicacies which Wasek loved.

Wasek always said it was the coming of the Jews that started the first change. One by one, the Polish families moved out and in no time, it seemed, the Polish neighborhood became a Jewish neighborhood. First the grocery was taken over by a Jew, and soon there were no more Polish delicacies offered. Although she had found nothing wrong with shopping in the Jewish-owned grocery, Wasek had forbidden her to shop there which meant she had to walk eleven

blocks to the nearest non-Jewish grocery. Even the church membership eventually changed when Father Lambroski left for a parish with more Polish stock.

Oh, how all this had rankled Wasek. He wanted to move, too, but the house was owned by Uncle Dabro who did not charge them rent. It infuriated Wasek to know that he could not move, that he was forced to stay among the Jews. Sonya remembered how he had begged Uncle Dabro to sell this house and buy another in a different neighborhood.

“What, because there are some Jews nearby? Did we not have Jews in the Old Country? In the town in which we lived?” Uncle Dabro had said. “Why I even liked some of them. Especially Itzik, the whiskey peddler.”

While Wasek had always found fault with everything and everybody, it was the Jews who became the main focus of his hatred. He would mutter, “Christ killers,” as he watched them walk past the house. Once Sonya had gently admonished him, but he flared up at her. “Am I saying anything differently than Father Zawicki used to say from the pulpit in the Old Country? Or even Father Lambroski, up on the corner? Did not my own father feel the same way?”

“But even in the old country they were but poor folk, even poorer than most of our people, and here they are just poor immigrants like us,” Sonya countered. She had become friendly with their next door neighbor, Mrs. Levine, who, she discovered, also had come to this country from Warsaw and spoke Polish beautifully.

“Don’t tell me about those Jew bastards. I know them. They’ll screw you at every turn. Best to get the jump on them. Hitler has the right idea.”

“Mrs. Levine--” Sonya started.

“That kosher cow?” Wasek spat. “I forbid you to speak to her again. She lives next door, and there is nothing I can do about that except curse her. Understand? God damn them all.”

Sonya had outwardly appeased her husband, but when she would see Mrs. Levine in the yard, she would call to her. Their daily chats across the back fence became the highpoint of her day. Mrs. Levine, on her part, had decided to ignore Wasek and his hateful insults. In fact, it was Mrs. Levine who presented Sonya with the canary.

“My going-away gift.” Mrs. Levine had said. “I’m leaving to help care for my son who is home from the war, and I cannot take the bird with me. Please, you take him. I know you will love him.”

Sonya had taken the canary and made up a story for Wasek that a woman from the church had dropped it by. Wasek reluctantly allowed her to keep it.

Mrs. Levine moving away signaled the second change in the neighborhood. A negro family moved into Mrs. Levine’s rented flat. Then another moved in up closer to the church.

Wasek was all but consumed by the frustration which fired his hatred. “First the dirty Jew bastards. Now the damned niggers. I can’t decide which is worse.”

In all other ways Wasek was a good man, Sonya thought. Why this terrible obsession? She took the whistling kettle from the gas stove and poured boiling water into the glass over the tea packed in the decorative metal tea holder. The tea holder had been her mother’s, and she treasured it. Her Little Love was singing now as if the kettle’s whistling had given it fresh inspiration. Sonya hummed an old Polish song she remembered her mother singing to her, and the bird trilled even more. She walked over to the cage. By poking her finger through the wires she could just reach the beautiful yellow bird, and she was delighted when it fluffed its feathers at her touch.

Impulsively, Sonya opened the small metal cage door and reached in to stroke her Little Love who transferred his perch to her finger. Carefully she withdrew the bird from the cage. It was such a sweet, lovely bird.

Without warning, the canary fluttered off her finger and flew to the window sill. In an instant it flew out the open window. Sonya stood there a moment, horrified. Then she raced to the window. The bird was gone. She opened the back door, leaned against the door jamb, and called out softly, "Little Love, come back. My Little Love where are you?"

Embarrassed because the neighbors might hear her, she went back into the house and stared first at the open window and then at the now empty cage. How could she have been so careless? How would it survive out there? Sparrows and robins, these could live outside, but could a canary? She sat down at the table. Tears welled up in her eyes. Slowly Sonya lowered her head to rest on her arms and sobbed.

In the late afternoon she heard a knock at the back door. She had walked in and out of the kitchen throughout the day hoping that the canary might return through the open window. The stillness of the house only magnified her loss. No beautiful trills, no singing. She smoothed her apron and opened the door.

"Mrs. Wisniewski? Hope I'm pronouncing that right. I'm Elizabeth Johnson, your next door neighbor." The large, black woman looked warily at Sonya. "I wonder, did you lose your canary bird? I used to hear him warble every day so pretty-like."

Sonya nodded. "Yes, he flew through the window this morning and now he is gone. It is so sad."

"Well, don't be sad no more, 'cause I got him right here." Mrs. Johnson held a cardboard shoe box. From within it came a fluttering sound.

"We better not open it out here, or it's liable to fly off again," offered a smiling Mrs. Johnson.

"Oh, please, come in. Come in. I can't believe you found him."

"Flew right up on my back screen door and started singing. My son, Emory, snuck up on him, clapped that shoe box over him, and managed to get the lid on, too. I figured it was your bird."

Mrs. Johnson carefully closed the back door while Sonya quickly shut the kitchen window. "Here," Mrs. Johnson said, reaching under the shoe box lid. When the fluttering had subsided, she withdrew her hand which gently held the bird.

"Here's your Little Love," Mrs. Johnson said.

"How did you know that was his name?" Sonya asked, the sadness in her eyes already replaced by the happiness she felt.

"Oh, I heard you call out this morning, and when the canary bird showed up, I just knew."

Sonya began to reach for her canary when she heard Wasek's angry snarl behind her.

"What the hell is going on here?" Wasek was livid, and Sonya knew why. His home, his sanctum had been defiled by the presence of this large, colored woman.

Calmly, Mrs. Johnson opened the cage door and deposited the canary within. She fastened the clasp and turned. "There. Now you got your pretty bird back."

"And now," shouted Wasek, "you can get the hell out of here."

Mrs. Johnson started to say something to Wasek, but shrugged, smiled at Sonya, and walked back out the door.

“You just stay on your side of that fence, you hear me?” Wasek shouted and slammed the door shut. He turned to Sonya. “Why was she in my house?” He saw the empty glass from which Sonya had sipped her morning tea. “Give her tea, will you?” Wasek picked up the glass and hurled it into the metal wastecan next to the sink. It shattered in the can.

“But she saved my beautiful bird. She returned him to me after he flew out the window. She was only trying to be a good neighbor.”

“I do not ever want to see that woman or any like her in this house again, do you understand me?” Wasek shouted, his voice rising to a scream, a blue vein pulsing in his forehead. He raised his hand. Sonya flinched then drew herself up.

“You would strike me, Wasek?”

He lowered his hand, dropped his eyes from hers and turned abruptly, stomping out of the room.

Sonya looked at her Little Love now hopping from swing to perch in the wire cage. “At least you are safe now, my beautiful little yellow bird, thanks to our kind neighbor,” she whispered and slowly drew the cage cover down.

In the morning she could hardly wait to get to the kitchen to take the cover off the cage and let Little Love trill away. Wasek had left the house earlier than usual. Before they had gone to bed she had tried to reason with him, to make him understand what a kind thing Mrs. Johnson had done. But Wasek had just shaken his head stubbornly. “First, there was that Jew, Levine. Now, this. I want you to have nothing to do with them. Do you hear me? I will not have them in my house.”

All that hate. She had lived in the same general area in the Old Country where Wasek had been raised. She had heard the same comments. Yet she shared none of those feelings. Poor Wasek. She was sorry that his soul was so tarnished.

Sonya reached the kitchen and started the gas flame under the kettle. The sun was out this morning. It was a beautiful day. She walked over to the cage and pulled up the cover. She expected her Little Love to greet her as he always did, but he was not on the perch or the swing. She saw him finally at the bottom of the cage lying so still. Slowly she undid the cage door and lifted the canary. Little Love lay there in her hand, his head twisted grotesquely.

Wasek!

At that moment Sonya discovered how easy it was to hate.