

Chapter One: Meet-Gross

T

he trick to entering your apartment in Warsaw after a neighbor's funeral was to hit the door at a slant: shoulder first, then foot, then the swinging of your left arm so you didn't drop the crumpled paper sack containing five bottles of no-name vodka and one glass container of plum jam (for vitamins). Justyna Kowalski considered herself an expert at such maneuvers, though tonight she executed them with more force than grace, her body still echoing the off-key "Sto Lat" that had concluded Mr. Kowalczyk's memorial like a threat. She managed to thunk herself into her flat without spilling the jam. The vodka, she realized too late, had already leaked a thin rivulet onto her thigh. So be it.

The interior was as she'd left it: dim, crowded, and suffused with the acrid warmth of the radiator. It was April, technically spring, but in Poland that meant the city just alternated between moist gray and damp yellow. The neighbors had cranked up the building's ancient heating system in a last ditch attempt to steam the sadness out of their bones, but the only result was a persistent reek of burnt dust and failing rubber gaskets. It gave the apartment a permanent undertone of industrial soup.

Justyna's legs found the path through the clutter by muscle memory—right past the wall of books, left at the lopsided couch, then forward until her shin tapped the sideboard with its sacred shrine of old eyeglasses. She had spent years learning the topography of this apartment, and she could have navigated it in her sleep or, as was the case tonight, in a state of heavy metabolic impairment. She set her vodka on the table by feel, wiped her sticky hand on the hem of her shirt, and let herself lean against the refrigerator for a moment, savoring the hum and the cool against her cheek.

The silence was so profound she heard her own pulse as a wet, animal noise in her ears. Mr. Kowalczyk had been the one who bested that silence—he'd made it a project, tapping at the radiators with his wedding ring, singing "Czerwone Korale" when the windows fogged, even arguing in the stairwell with the building manager

about the fines for excessive cabbage disposal. He had not been a great man, but he had been reliably loud, and in his absence the building seemed to fold in on itself. She wondered if the other tenants would remember him as “that one who always yelled,” or, more likely, “the dead one from the second floor.” She herself would remember him as the only person who ever called her “miss” without pity, even after she lost her sight.

She took a long swig of vodka, straight from the bottle, and let the liquid burn away the taste of funeral sausage. She was reaching for the jam when her foot caught the edge of something—a loose tile, maybe, or the warped metal cover of the heating vent that separated her kitchen from Kowalczyk’s old flat. There was an instant of zero gravity, a cartoon’s worth of windmilling, before gravity and fate conspired to slam her forward onto the stained linoleum.

Her teeth met something small, round, and unexpectedly gelatinous.

For a long moment she did not move. The impact had forced her mouth open, lips pressed around an object not quite firm enough to be food, not quite soft enough to be tissue. Her tongue, betraying her, rolled it across her palate. She had bitten through things before—olives, pickled onions, the occasional errant marble during childhood—but this was something else entirely. This was anatomical.

She gagged and spat onto the floor. The thing bounced, wetly, against the sideboard, then rolled in a lazy arc before coming to rest against her bare foot. Instinctively, she reached for it with her hands. Her fingers found a sphere, slick and yielding, with just enough resistance to suggest it had once been alive.

Only then did her brain catch up with her hands.

She had, by some physics-defying miracle or perhaps as a direct result of Kowalczyk’s vengeful ghost, bitten into a human eye.

It was small, smaller than she expected, though maybe it had shrunk in death. The sclera was soft as pudding. The cornea bulged out in a way she found obscene, as if it were straining to see her through darkness. She realized, with a wave of nausea, that it could only belong to one person.

“Oh, you bastard,” she croaked.

She let the eye drop from her hand, recoiling as if it might leap back up and attach itself to her own face. Her breath came in ragged gasps, echoing in the empty apartment. She considered, for a wild instant, calling the police to report a post-mortem home invasion. She considered scrubbing her mouth with dish soap, or perhaps the vodka.

But before she could reach for anything, the world changed.

It started as a pinpoint of blue—no, not blue, something sharper and cleaner, a color that didn't exist in her previous vocabulary. It bloomed outward, blooming like the afterimage from a flashbulb, flooding her skull with a sudden, furious brightness. Shapes collided, multiplied, melted into each other with impossible speed. There was a ceiling, white and stippled with decades of nicotine. There was a wall, yellow, but not the yellow of memory—this yellow was alive, sickly and vivid, attacking her from all sides. The books were not books, but a smear of rectangles, each vibrating with its own frequency of shadow. The jam jar sparkled with a ruby sheen that made her want to both vomit and cry.

She was seeing. She was seeing.

She screamed, or thought she screamed, but her own voice sounded miles away. Her hands shot up to her face, groping for the familiar contours. Eyelids: still shut, as they had always been. Nose: still there, nothing missing. But beneath her fingers, her skull vibrated with the wild, horrifying certainty that her brain was receiving input it had no idea how to process.

She opened her eyes. The world went electric.

Vision didn't come in like a slow sunrise. It crashed through her like a train, lurching from darkness to riot with no transition. Her hands in front of her face were the first things she saw, but they were wrong, not like the anatomy diagrams she'd memorized as a kid. The skin was too pale, flecked with blue veins, and the fingers moved with a ghostly blur. Beyond them, the room stretched and warped, corners bending at impossible angles. The vent cover that had tripped her loomed like a pit trap. The sideboard, covered in orphaned reading glasses, seemed to multiply itself, each pair of lenses catching the light in a different key of glare.

She stumbled to her feet, clutching at the table for balance. Her head spun, not with drink, but with the overload of data. Each surface reflected light differently; each object sang its own discordant visual note. She blinked, and the whole world juddered, then realigned itself at a slightly different tilt. She made her way to the cracked mirror above the sink—half out of disbelief, half a kind of scientific rigor. She looked.

The woman in the mirror was a stranger. Stringy hair, black as oil slick. Sharp cheekbones, which she'd been told about but never imagined so angular. Eyes sunken, rimmed with purple, but wide open and glittering like lake ice. She touched her face, one hand tracing the line from temple to chin. The reflection followed, obedient, but the motion left a smear of afterimage that took several seconds to resolve.

She laughed, a sick, delighted sound.

Her scientist's brain kicked in, clawing back some control. If she could see—if, through some perverse miracle, she could see—then she needed to know how long it would last. She glanced at the digital clock on her stove, squinting until the numbers pulled into focus. 02:11. She repeated the numbers aloud, anchoring herself. Then she began the frantic task of cataloging everything she could: the color of the walls (yellow, but like a bruise), the number of bottles on the table (five vodka, one jam), the pattern of cracks in the mirror (resembled a spiderweb, she realized, and smiled at the horror-movie poetry of it).

She reached for her phone, thumb shaking as she punched the screen. She opened the timer app and started a stopwatch. Twenty-three minutes, she decided. If it lasted more than twenty-three minutes, she'd have to invent a new hypothesis.

The world did not settle down. If anything, it became more bizarre. The fluorescent bulb above her kitchen flickered at a speed she'd never noticed, each blink a tiny seizure in her field of view. The shadows moved with intent, as if animated by their own logic. She saw shapes dart outside her window—birds? Bats? Or just floaters in her newly-minted vision? She had read once that the brain, deprived of input, made up its own images. Was this a hallucination? Was she simply drunk, mourning, and concussed?

She paced the apartment, narrating what she saw, voice raw and urgent.

“Floor is...brownish. Brown with orange stains. Table: dirty, four legs, unstable. Window: cracked, but you can see the street. Lamp is green, chipped at the base. Chair is...chair is blue? Why would a chair be blue? That’s absurd.”

She wondered, as she paced, if this was how newborns felt—the terror of being unprepared for sensation. She tried to close her eyes, just to see what would happen, but the colors kept going, shifting and seething on the insides of her lids. She opened them again, and the world resumed its kaleidoscopic assault.

At precisely 02:34, the world went out.

It did not fade; it snapped, like a switch thrown by a sadistic engineer. One instant, there were a hundred shades of horror and beauty; the next, there was nothing. Justyna gasped, hands flying to her face. She blinked, hard, but there was only blackness—familiar, comforting in a way, but now laced with a longing she’d never known.

Her breathing slowed. She knelt down, feeling her way to the spot where she’d spat out the eye. Her fingers found it, cold and sticky. She shuddered, but did not recoil this time. Instead, she held it in her palm, weighing its impossible significance.

She was alone in the dark, but now she knew what she was missing.

She set the eye on a plate, covered it with a napkin, and sat quietly at her kitchen table. Twenty-three minutes, she wrote in her phone’s notes app. Enough time to see the world, once, before it all went black again.

She poured herself another drink, toasted the air, and wondered if anyone had ever died of too much vision.

She would test the theory, if it killed her.

The first time she set out to buy eyes on the open market, Justyna rehearsed her lines in the reflection of a tram window. Not because she feared being recognized—her own parents would have trouble picking her out in a lineup—but because nothing

about the transaction felt natural. In a city that prided itself on ignoring the unusual, she worried her attempt at normalcy would look like theater.

The tram slithered through Warsaw's industrial fringe, past warehouses scarred with graffiti and empty lots where weeds lanced up through the asphalt. Night made everything softer, but also more dangerous. The "Eye Scream" truck was easy to spot; its LED sign projected a blinking, anatomically correct eyeball in candy colors above a battered Mercedes chassis. Beneath, a hand-painted menu offered cones, popsicles, and "takeaway specials" in medical script.

The vendor, Wzrok, was already outside when she arrived. He wore a double layer of surgical aprons—one disposable, one starched white—over dark joggers, and his beard was trimmed to surgical precision. He recognized her at once, maybe from the stick of her walk or the way she kept her head slightly down and to the right, compensating for old habits.

"Miss Kowalski," he said, voice clipped but not unkind. "Your order is ready."

He used a blue nitrile glove to open the chest freezer bolted to the side of the truck. Fog tumbled out, thick and theatrical, as he pulled out a small, vacuum-sealed pouch. It looked like the world's least appetizing mochi ball: pale, veined, a pupil spot visible through the plastic.

Justyna took a shaky breath. "Is it...fresh?"

"Of course," Wzrok replied, mildly affronted. "Procured this morning, registered, and traceable. My cousin works surgical waste on the east side. Some hospitals even run specials—retina Wednesdays, 'buy two get one free' for schools."

She snorted, then caught herself. "Sorry, just. It's been a weird week."

He shrugged, immune to the discomfort of his clientele. "It's a weird business. Most customers pay extra for delivery, but I respect a woman who does her own procurement."

She dug into her coat and handed over the crumpled envelope of disability notes. Five hundred zloty. Less than her weekly rent, but more than she spent on groceries in a month. The pouch felt cold and slick in her hand, like holding a bag of frozen tears.

“You want a flavor card?” Wzrok asked, proffering a laminated sheet with stylized eye drawings, each labeled: “Standard,” “Enhanced,” “Artistic,” “Business Professional,” “Child—Organic,” and so on. She noticed “Albino” and “Chromatic” had been crossed out with black marker.

“I’m good,” she said. “I’ll start with the basics.”

Wzrok made a little bow. “Eat within forty-eight hours. Keep cold. No refunds if you lose it.” He winked, a move both menacing and expertly practiced.

Back on the tram, Justyna kept her purchase hidden inside the sleeve of her parka. The pouch thumped lightly against her wrist with every step, reminding her of the task ahead.

At home, she lined the kitchen with sheets of baking parchment. Not for hygiene—she wasn’t a monster—but for psychological containment. She set her timer, placed the pouch in a chipped cereal bowl, and stared at it until the print on the label came into focus: “Donor: male, 42, Accountant.”

She peeled the pouch open. The eye slipped out with a wet, almost cheery plop. She hesitated, wondering if she should boil it, season it, anything to make the next few minutes less grotesque. But the memory of her last experiment—of twenty-three minutes of color—banished all doubt.

She pinched the eye between thumb and forefinger, shut her own (useless) lids, and bit down.

The sensation was immediate and catastrophic. The world spun, tilted, then resolved in high-def clarity. This time she didn’t panic. She let the colors sort themselves, the room snap into place: wallpaper brown and crusted with old damp, linoleum floor a scabbed beige. The fridge’s digital readout shone a radioactive green, and the kitchen lamp blazed orange like a sun going nova. Her hands, she noted, were surprisingly bony and trembled when she held them up.

She checked the timer. 01:08. The vision was narrower than before, as if she were peering down a tunnel lined with cellophane. Everything seemed overlit, and the corners of the room flickered in and out of existence. She scribbled quick notes on a legal pad, experimenting with how fast she could look from one object to another

before the tunnel collapsed.

At the twelve-minute mark, a wave of exhaustion hit. Her heart rate dropped; her thoughts grew fuzzy. She caught herself staring at the microwave display for almost ninety seconds, convinced it was trying to send her a message in Morse code. With two minutes left on the timer, the world began to pixelate, breaking into tiny rectangles that tumbled and refit like a spreadsheet gone rabid.

She rode it out, then blinked. Darkness again.

She wrote:

“Test 01: Accountant. Vision duration: 19m 08s. Quality: 2/5. Tunnel vision, overexposed, limited peripheral awareness. Everything appears as spreadsheets. Possible side effect: mild depression.”

She rinsed her mouth, poured herself half a glass of vodka, and set the timer for an hour before trying the second sample.

This one came from a different source. The label read “Female, 28, Street Artist.” The eye was bigger, the iris flecked with hints of green and yellow. It seemed to stare at her even as she handled it, and she was briefly tempted to apologize for what came next.

She repeated the procedure, more confidently this time. The world erupted in a different flavor of chaos. Colors bled into each other, hot pink chasing neon blue across the ceiling. She blinked, and the paint on her walls slithered, changing hue with every breath. Her own hands were riotous: orange knuckles, purple veins, and blue-green outlines. For a moment, she saw sound—her own heartbeat pulsing as a red wave, the radiator’s groan a low, shimmering gold.

She laughed, a sharp bark. The vision lasted longer—over thirty minutes—and left her with a throbbing headache and an aftertaste of sweet, chemical strawberry.

She logged:

“Test 02: Street Artist. Vision duration: 31m 17s. Quality: 5/5. Intense color, synesthetic overlap with sound/taste. Occasional hallucinations, but extraordinary

experience. Would repeat.”

Justyna sat back, eyes closed, savoring the echo of vision in her brain. For the first time, she understood why people spent fortunes on dangerous drugs, or risked years of prison for the right kind of forbidden fruit.

She got up, cleaned the table, and sorted the wrappers and notes into an empty shoebox. There was order in it—each experiment a data point, each memory a step closer to understanding whatever mad, beautiful process had unlocked her skull.

She ran her hands over her face, tracing the lines of nose, brow, chin. The sensation was different now: she could picture each contour, each imperfection, even in the dark.

Her mind raced ahead to the next trial. What would it be like to see through a surgeon’s eyes? Or a child’s? Or her own, someday, if science caught up to her appetite?

She smiled, the first genuine one in months, and reached for her phone to schedule the next pickup.

Out there, in the city’s secret places, whole new worlds waited for her. She just had to keep eating her way toward them.

After three months, Justyna’s apartment became more laboratory than home. The transformation was gradual, an accretion of systems and supplies that grew from her initial impulse for order. Now the kitchen counter was dominated by a repurposed wine fridge, shelves adjusted to cradle custom Tupperware labeled with masking tape and permanent marker. Each container bore a code: donor initials, occupation, purchase date, expected “shelf life” (her own gallows humor), and a five-star quality rating that she amended in thick black Xs.

The notebook she used for data collection had migrated from legal pad to ring-bound ledger, its columns regimented by lines so straight she wondered if the printer was running a secret algorithm for the government. It chronicled, with obsessive clarity,

every “dose”: donor profile, duration of effect, perceptual anomalies, mood shifts, and post-experience crash. She’d added new columns after the first few weeks—one for synesthesia, one for “hallucinatory overlay,” another for whether the experience made her want to live or die.

She had even constructed a color-coded calendar on her bedroom wall, squares of Post-it in blue, red, and green, each one marking a planned “session.” She scheduled them like medical appointments, lining them up with days she wanted to see—really see—the world. Fridays before her gallery gig. The first day of every month. Significant anniversaries, including the day of Kowalczyk’s funeral, which she observed as a private holiday.

She sometimes wondered if the elaborate bureaucracy was an attempt to justify the appetite. She suspected, deep down, it was just how her brain preferred to run: as a system, not a soul.

On the morning of her next experiment, she rose before dawn, shut off her phone’s alarm, and laid out the day’s supplies in silence. The fridge let off a chilly sigh when she opened it, cold seeping into her wrist bones. She picked out a container marked “MJK—Photographer—4.2 stars,” the date from last Thursday. The eye inside seemed to glow with anticipation, the iris still vibrant even through its preservative haze.

She brought it to the sink, rinsed the casing in cool tap water, and set it on a folded napkin. This was the part she found soothing—the predictability, the surgical routine. She closed the kitchen door, pressed her spine against the wood, and listened to the city for one minute: neighbor’s alarm clock, tram bell, the far-off whump of the power plant.

Then she bit in, quick and deliberate, letting the eye burst between her teeth. The flavor was always worse than memory, but after the first few times her body learned not to protest.

The effect was instant. Vision roared up, crystalline and sharp as a lens aperture snapping wide. She staggered backward, dizzy, and clamped a hand over her mouth. Light streamed through the windows; she saw every mote of dust, every smear of grime on the glass, the faint trail left by a slug on the outside sill. She spun and looked

at the fridge: the cheap white plastic gleamed, its interior shelves etched with the blue of morning. She checked the clock—05:44—and blinked to log the time.

She kept a timer running on her phone, always. This one lasted thirty-seven minutes, not her record but a solid showing. The photographer's vision was extraordinary: hyper-aware of movement and edge, colors more saturated, light tinged with a subtle, yearning melancholy. When she looked at her own hands, the skin glowed pale gold, the veins tracing intricate rivers beneath. Even the dirt under her fingernails looked artistic, a study in chiaroscuro.

She spent the session walking the apartment, examining every object as if seeing it for the first time. She went to the bathroom, stared at her face in the mirror, and tried to memorize each line and pore. She compared herself to the photo on her government ID, the one taken before her sight vanished for good. She didn't recognize the person in either image, which made her laugh, then almost cry.

As the vision faded, she wrote:

"MJK—Photographer: 37m, clarity excellent, color fidelity 5/5, edges persist after closing eyes, minor hallucination at 17m (window reflection appeared to move independently). Mood: nostalgic, slightly euphoric. Crash: mild. Would recommend for holidays, creative work, first dates."

She tucked the notes into her ledger and logged the empty container in her disposal bin. The entire process, from prep to finish, took less than an hour. She found herself wishing it could last longer, or that she could stack experiences, one after another, the way some people chain-smoked cigarettes or ran marathons.

On days when she didn't have a session planned, she felt jittery, like she was missing appointments with herself. She tried to distract the urge by scheduling extra work shifts, or calling her mother, or scrolling through old photos on her phone. Nothing scratched the itch like the ritual itself.

Her favorite sessions were the ones she planned in advance, like the morning before the Modern Art Museum's new opening. She rose early, set out a "Curator—female, 56, 3.8 stars" for the occasion, and ate it with a side of strong black coffee. The vision it gave her was cool and analytical, less about color than about composition. She saw

every painting's flaws, every scuff on the baseboards. She spent the next hour writing bitterly funny reviews in her head, knowing she'd forget them by noon.

She sometimes wondered how other people spent their days, if they felt the same hunger. She'd never discussed it, not even with Paulina, who would either mock her or (more likely) insist on finding her an "eye buddy" through one of her underground contacts. There were support groups for people like her, but the thought of sitting in a circle and sharing vision logs made her want to claw out her own tongue.

Instead, she kept perfecting her private system, always chasing the next improvement.

She started freezing the better samples, just in case of shortages. She developed a shorthand code for rating the side effects: D for depression, S for synesthesia, X for hallucination, V for vividness. She even color-coded the containers, blue for "cool," red for "intense," yellow for "mild." Her fridge became a pointillist landscape of possibility.

At night, she sometimes dreamed in borrowed color. She woke with the ghost of vision shimmering behind her eyelids, like an afterimage from a lightbulb stared at too long. She'd lie there, listening to the city breathe, and think about how the world looked to people who didn't need to steal perspective.

She would never be one of those people, but she had learned to enjoy the anticipation. The taste of seeing, measured out in small, perfect doses.

She looked at her schedule for tomorrow—two sessions, both high priority. The first for a job interview, the second for a late-night walk through Lazienki Park, a treat for herself after a week of self-discipline.

She closed the fridge, double-checked the locks, and crawled into bed. She fell asleep with the satisfaction of a scientist who'd found her hypothesis: that life, properly engineered, could be beautiful, if only in intervals.

The café was called "Znacznik," but everyone just called it The Marker, a tribute to the permanent ink stains that adorned every surface and the sense that time itself

lingered in this particular corner of Warsaw like cigarette smoke. Even on a Tuesday morning it thrummed with nervous energy: students sipping tart espresso from cracked mugs, adjunct professors hunched over ancient laptops, two police officers arguing philosophy while devouring an improbable number of poppyseed buns.

Justyna chose the table in the window, the one with the deepest grooves carved into the wood. She liked the way it felt under her fingertips, the scars telling a tactile history of every restless soul who'd ever sat here. She sipped from a chipped cup and let her senses roam, cataloging the room by sound and smell: scorched milk, rain-slick pavement, the wooly tang of someone's ancient scarf. She could have done this in her sleep, but today her brain hummed on a low, anxious frequency, anticipating Paulina's entrance.

Paulina was never on time, but she always made an entrance. This morning she arrived with a burst of cold air and a swirl of cheap perfume, flinging herself into the seat opposite Justyna as if pursued by wolves or creditors. She wore a pea coat the color of traffic cones and a scarf that had once been white, now marbled with foundation, lipstick, and what looked like actual blood.

"God, this weather," Paulina said, flopping her arms on the table. "My nipples could cut glass. Is it always this arctic in April? Or is my metabolism just tanking with age?"

She grinned, all teeth and guile. There were new bruises on her neck—two, dark as plums and arranged like a designer's concept of symmetry. She ran a finger over them with theatrical delight.

"Jesus, Paulina," said Justyna, "did you get mugged, or just laid?"

"Both!" Paulina replied, delighted. "But only the second one got me off. You want the story, or will it ruin your morning?"

Justyna shrugged. "Everything ruins my morning. Might as well make it interesting."

Paulina leaned in. "Okay, so there's this girl. Well, I say girl, but she's more like a sentient disco ball—she has four eyes and they all change color when she's turned on. Which is constant, by the way, and completely distracting. Her accent is, I don't know, somewhere between Vilnius and hell. Anyway, we're making out in the stairwell at her place, and she asks if I want to see how far her tongue goes."

Justyna started laughing—too loud, even for this café. Heads swiveled. Paulina grinned wider.

“I say sure, why not, and she—get this—she licks my uvula. Like, perfectly. I think my soul left my body for a minute.”

“Is it back now?” Justyna asked, deadpan.

“Only partly. She’s seeing someone else tonight. A guy with bifurcated genitals. Warsaw is wild right now, babe.” Paulina took Justyna’s hand and squeezed it, warm and manic. “But enough about me. You look... less dead than usual. New makeup?”

“Experimental treatment,” Justyna said. “I’ll spare you the details.”

Paulina laughed, then snorted, then choked on her own spit, which only made her laugh harder. “You are the worst liar on earth. You found a new dealer, didn’t you?”

Justyna shrugged. “It’s not like I have options.”

“Does Wzrok still run his operation out of that food truck? The one with the terrifying anime eye on it?”

Justyna nodded, savoring the comfort of shared absurdity.

“I heard he got busted last month. Some regulatory thing about his refrigeration units not meeting standards. You know what he did? He started calling it ‘artisanal eye-scream’ and doubled the price. People are still buying.”

“Capitalism,” Justyna said, raising her cup.

“Anyway,” Paulina said, “you deserve better. There are safer ways, you know. Certified growers. Someone with a proper license. You need a renewable source, darling. Someone who can grow them back. Like my ex with the regenerating liver—God, he was a nightmare, but convenient for a while.”

Justyna grimaced, half in disgust, half in envy. “I’m not looking for a relationship right now.”

Paulina smirked. “You say that every time, and then you end up emotionally involved with the first weirdo who offers you bodily fluids. Seriously, babe, you’re like a sucker fish for bad decisions.”

She flagged down the barista, ordered two more coffees and a plate of what she called “the funeral cookies”—dry, dense, and dusted with so much sugar they looked embalmed. She crumbled one between her fingers as she spoke.

“Have you considered group therapy?” Paulina asked, so breezily it sounded like a joke. “There’s this support group for... people like us. I went once. It was half performance art, half genuine trauma, but the snacks were good and nobody tried to sell you vitamins.”

Justyna rolled her eyes. “Please tell me it wasn’t at that place on Wilcza, the one with the moldy sign?”

“No! This was at a bakery. Old Polish lady runs it, used to do pierogi but switched to support groups for the tax exemption. She makes bread that’s so good it’ll make you want to punch your own mother.”

Paulina scribbled the address on a napkin, her handwriting as erratic as her conversational style. She slid it across the table. “Just go. Worst case, you get a free dinner. Best case, you meet someone with a spare optic nerve.”

Justyna’s fingers traced the napkin. It was damp at the edge, already blurring the ink, but the address was still legible. She tucked it into her pocket, feigning nonchalance.

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, eavesdropping on the students at the next table, who were debating the ethics of synthetic organs versus “natural” mutation. Paulina mouthed along with the most pompous speaker, and Justyna snorted into her coffee.

“Sometimes I think we’re the only sane ones in this city,” Paulina said, watching the rain slice past the window. “Other times, I think sanity is just another mutation.”

“I prefer madness,” Justyna replied. “It’s easier to fake.”

Paulina raised her cup. “To faking it. And to never dying of boredom.”

They clinked. The noise was small, but it felt like a victory.

When Paulina finally left—late to work, as always—Justyna lingered at the table, tracing the grooves in the wood and letting the echoes of the conversation settle. She pulled the napkin from her pocket and read the address again, letting the possibility drift from joke to reality.

She might not be ready for community, but she was definitely ready for better bread.

That night, at home, she added a new entry to her calendar. Not an “eye day,” not even a test run—just a possibility, penciled in with a question mark. She looked at her wall, at the careful patchwork of notes and plans and color codes, and thought about how none of it meant anything if she was the only one who understood the pattern.

She ate dinner standing at the counter, hands sticky with jam, eyes closed, trying to imagine the taste of someone else’s memories. Then she rinsed her plate, locked the fridge, and set an alarm for the following day.

As she lay in bed, the city hummed around her, alive with its own secrets and schemes. She wondered what it would be like to walk into that bakery, to sit in a circle and say, “Hi, my name is Justyna, and I steal the world through other people’s eyes.”

She wondered if anyone would laugh.

She hoped they would.