

Excerpt from “Red Wings”

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Clara’s maternal grandmother lived a mile from a burning town. In this town in western Pennsylvania, an underground fire was trapped in an abandoned coalmine. The fire had burned for over fifty years. There was no way to put it out. The government paid people to relocate. Clara’s grandmother’s church friends were among the last holdouts—too stubborn or sick or old to leave. Clara’s grandmother visited them often to deliver casseroles, soups, pirogues. She donned her ski-goggles when she drove up the smoky hill. If she stepped in the wrong place when crossing their front lawns, the rubber of her shoes melted.

The residents of the fiery town loved it there. It was the only home they’d ever known. They knew how to walk to avoid the sinkholes and crackling flames. They knew how to live with fire. Clara’s grandmother lived just down the hill from the worst of the inferno. She too loved her little gray Victorian house filled with doilies and crucifixes, her cat named Whisky, her garden of yellow, wilting grass. She even loved the smell of the smoky wind through the slag heaps, she told Clara. “There’s only a touch of arsenic in the air,” she’d say with a wink. “Keeps me young.”

She baked the most delicious flourless chocolate cake.

When Clara was in high school, she accompanied her grandmother on one of her

food-delivery missions to the fiery town. She couldn’t believe how expertly her grandmother maneuvered the car around the sunken portions of the rural highway where flames flickered through the asphalt. As they drove towards a large open crack in the road where steam billowed, Clara shouted, “Stop! Stop! The road’s all broken! We can’t drive out here!”

But Clara’s grandmother knew just what she was doing. Seconds before they were completely engulfed in smoke, seconds before they plunged through a gaping hole in the street, her grandmother swerved off to the shoulder. “I took you here to pick teaberries,” she said.

Teaberries were hard pink bullets you had to hold into your mouth for a long time before the sharp cranberry-like juice prickled out. They had a sour, dusty consistency, an arresting tart sweetness. Clara hadn’t tasted a teaberry since her grandmother died, but once she saw teaberry candy for sale during a road trip through Bird-in-Hand Pennsylvania. She bought out the store’s entire supply.

When Clara was little, her grandmother played a game called “count your ribs,” poking her fingers up and down her skinny frame. It made her laugh until she choked.

Clara’s grandmother called her ‘schnickle,’ or ‘little snail’ in Yiddish (although Catholic, she spoke some Yiddish, since she absorbed a lot

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of languages in coal country). Shnickle, she'd say, pinching Clara's cheeks, and pulling her into a vise-grip hug. She smelled of sandalwood musk and smoke, butter and sugar. She held Clara tighter than anyone, and she had the most beautiful name. It gave Clara goose-bumps.

In her dreams, Clara heard the name's warm Polish pronunciation with its rolling 'R,' purring like a lion. She could use the English pronunciation, but it was the sound of the Polish name that expanded her lungs, that helped her stand tall. It was the Polish that made her skin tingle.

(End of Excerpt)