Name: _____ Date: _____

The Year After the Fire

Reading level 13 · 1840 words

On the eighth of October, 1871, Hedda Wojcik was twelve years old and had never carried anything heavier than a hymn book. She was standing on the back step with a plate of bread and butter when the church bells began to ring in the wrong order. She saw her mother come out of the kitchen with her sleeves still rolled and look at the sky. The sky over the river was the color of the inside of a stove. Within an hour the whole street had filled with people running, wagons piled with bedding and birdcages, men bellowing names, and a hot wind carrying burning shingles overhead like flights of orange birds, and Hedda understood that the thing she was looking at was not a neighbor's chimney fire but something that had no intention of stopping.

Her mother did not scream. She put her little son Janek on her hip, took the tin box that held the deeds and the insurance paper, and said in Polish, very evenly, "Hedda, take what you can carry, and take it now." Hedda ran upstairs through the acrid smoke and stood in her parents' bedroom with her heart hammering, and her hands, without consulting her, picked up the cake of lavender soap from her mother's washstand. It was the one thing in the room that smelled of Sunday. She would remember that for the rest of her life, with a mixture of shame and something close to wonder: that on the worst night of her childhood she had saved a bar of soap.

They walked all night, with the glow behind them and the roaring never quite fading. Somewhere before dawn they stood at the edge of the lake among hundreds of others, with the wind throwing sparks into the water and the smoke so thick that Janek's cries came out in coughs. By Monday the Wojcik lumber yard, which had stood on the river for fourteen years, was a field of smoldering timbers, and nobody could say that it had ever been a business at all. The foreman, Mr. Kowal, found them at noon, black to the eyebrows and weeping, and said that every stack of seasoned pine, every plank and joist and beam was gone, and the office, and the horses. On Tuesday morning the rain came, and it was far too late.

The insurance company had burned along with its own office, as half the companies in the city had. Mama sat holding the tin box on a borrowed pew, looking at the paper inside as though it were written in a language she had never learned. For three days they slept in a church basement on the West Side. On the fourth day Mama stood in a line at the relief station, in her good black coat with the velvet collar, to be handed a sack of flour and a pair of blankets by a young man who called her "ma'am." Hedda stayed outside on the curb with her fists clenched. "We are not beggars," she said, when her mother came out. "No," said Mama. "We are people who are hungry. That is different."

The difference was Mr. Gallagher. Tata had sold him lumber for the drying sheds of his laundry on the West Side every spring for seven years, and Gallagher had never been late with a payment or a greeting. He had a gray mustache, a limp, and a voice like a gate, and he found Mama in the church basement on the fifth day and said, in his abrupt way, that the loft above the drying room was empty, that the mangle needed two more hands than he had, and that he did not do charity but would do wages. "Forty cents a day for the girl, if she can sort and fold," he said, "and the missus can sew for my customers. The roof does not leak. Much." Mama looked at him for a long moment and then, to Hedda's astonishment, held out her hand.

Hedda hated it for exactly eleven days. The laundry was one long room filled with steam, where six women stood at six tubs scrubbing with lye soap that took the skin off their knuckles, and a mangle that thumped like a slow heart, and rows of lines from which hung white sheets as stiff as boards. A bar of yellow soap cost five cents, and Mr. Gallagher counted them out each morning like a banker counting gold. In her first week Hedda scorched the collar of a customer's shirt with an iron that had got too hot, and he held it up between two fingers and said that it had cost him a week's wages of hers, and that she would learn what things cost, and that she had better learn it quickly.

She learned from a girl named Maeve O'Hara, who was fourteen and had red hands and a tongue like a paring knife. Maeve did not like Hedda's coat, or Hedda's way of saying "pardon," or Hedda's habit of standing very straight at the tub as though somebody were watching. "You think you are too good to be here," she said, in the second week. "Everyone here used to be somebody. My da was a ship's cook, until the ship sank." Hedda opened her mouth to say something proud and found, to her surprise, that she had nothing. "I don't think that," she said. It was close enough to true, and Maeve looked at her sideways for a while, and then she handed her a stack of sheets without comment.

Maeve taught her the marks. Every family's linen carried a few stitches of colored thread in one corner, a red cross for the baker's wife, a blue circle for the doctor, three green knots for the family on the corner, and a laundress learned to read them at a glance. In a month Hedda could read the neighborhood the way other people read a newspaper. She knew which household had a new baby, because of the tiny blankets, and which had lost someone, because of the black cuffs coming in and nothing going out. She knew who was too proud to ask for credit. Nobody on their old street had ever told her any of this, because she had never thought to ask, and she had lived beside those neighbors for four years without learning a single name.

At Christmas they kept Wigilia in the loft, on a crate covered by Mama's good tablecloth, which had somehow come through the night in the bottom of the tin box. Mama set out the plate of Christmas wafers and, as the old custom required, one extra place for any stranger who might knock. Mr. Gallagher came, and Maeve with her mother and four brothers, and a German tailor from the next block who had lost his shop, and by the end there were fourteen

people on boxes and barrels. Mama broke the wafer with each of them, one by one, and said the old blessing in Polish, and none of them understood a word of it. Hedda watched from the end of the crate.

By spring the sound of hammers had come back to the city. All along the West Side, new boards were going up in raw yellow rows, and Hedda, passing them on the way to work, caught herself checking the grain for the Wojcik mark and was angry with herself, and then not. Mr. Kowal had found work on a crew of carpenters, and Mama had spent a large share of what the insurance company finally sent, a fraction of what it had promised, on a sewing machine with a black iron treadle. By April she was taking in dresses from half the street. The yard was gone. The family now had a different shape, with Mama at the machine, and Hedda at the tub, and Janek in the school on the corner, learning to say his sums in English.

By summer she knew the names. She knew Mrs. Kessler at the bakery, and the two Ryan boys who carried the baskets, and old Mr. Szymanski with his cart, and the Vojtek family from three doors down, who spoke Czech and sold her cherries on credit. She knew which dogs bit, and which did not. She knew that the O'Hara boys were not as wild as they looked, and that Maeve had a letter from her father that she read every Sunday and never showed to anyone. One evening in July, standing over a tub with her hands raw and her back aching from the tubs, Hedda realized with a small shock that she had said "good morning" in four languages before breakfast, and not once thought of it as unusual.

On the eighth of October, 1872, a year to the evening, Mr. Gallagher closed the laundry early. Nobody said why. The women hung their aprons on the pegs, and the lines of sheets in the yard stood motionless in the last of the light, and from the roofs of the new buildings came the sound of church bells, ringing in order this time. Hedda sat on the loft stairs with Janek, who was eight now and had lost a tooth, and who had been asking questions all day. "Who lives in our old house?" he said. "Does anybody know where the fire started? Why did the paper say it was a cow?" Hedda said that nobody was sure about the cow, and that Maeve's uncle said it was a cigar, and that she did not think anyone would ever know.

"Then who do you know?" said Janek, which was the kind of question that only an eight-year-old can ask. So she told him, counting on her fingers, up one side of the street and down the other, house by house. Gallagher, with the limp. The O'Haras, all seven. Mrs. Kessler and her sourdough, and the tailor and his wife, and the Ryans, and Mr. Szymanski, and the Vojteks with the cherries, and old Mrs. Lund who knitted, and the doctor with the blue circle. By the time she reached the end of the second hand she had run out of fingers and started again, and Janek had fallen asleep against her arm, and the bells had stopped.

She sat there in the dusk a while longer. Then she went down to the tub room, where the last tub still stood full of gray water, and she took the cake of lavender soap from the shelf where it had waited for twelve months, wrapped in a handkerchief, too precious to use. She

unwrapped it, and held it to her face, and it smelled of Sunday and of a house that did not exist anymore. Then she dipped her hands into the water and began to wash, slowly, as Maeve had taught her, and the smell of lavender rose up with the steam and drifted out through the open door, over the white sheets hanging in the dark.

Questions

1. What did Hedda carry out of the burning house?

A. Her father's watch
B. A cake of lavender soap
C. The family's money box

2. Why did the insurance paper not help the Wojcik family?

A. The company had burned too, and could not pay what it owed
B. Mama had lost it in the lake
C. Mr. Gallagher refused to read it

3. What does "relief" mean in "the relief station"?

A. Rest after work
B. Help given to people who lost their homes
C. A kind of soap

4. How did Hedda begin to learn her neighbors' names?

A. From a newspaper
B. From the thread marks on their laundry
C. From a church list

5. What does the ending show about Hedda?

A. She knows her neighbors now, which she did not before the fire
B. She wants to go back to the old house
C. She has forgotten the fire completely

Words to know

lye: harsh soap ingredient
mangle: sheet-pressing machine
treadle: foot pedal
relief: help for victims
foreman: crew boss
insurance: money protection

Answer key: The Year After the Fire

1. B. A cake of lavender soap
2. A. The company had burned too, and could not pay what it owed
3. B. Help given to people who lost their homes
4. B. From the thread marks on their laundry
5. A. She knows her neighbors now, which she did not before the fire