



# HALF LIFE

*A Novel*

JILLIAN CANTOR

HARPER  PERENNIAL

NEW YORK • LONDON • TORONTO • SYDNEY • NEW DELHI • AUCKLAND

# MARYA



*Poland, 1891*

I packed my things in such a haste, barely even seeing my clothing through my haze of tears and anger. My valise lay open on my bed, and I pulled what little I owned from the corner chest, stuffing it inside, wiping away at the tears on my cheeks with the backs of my hands. It didn't matter that my dresses would wrinkle. They were threadbare, and anyway, who would see them now except for Papa and Hela when I returned to them in Warsaw? *Penniless. Worthless. Abandoned.*

That was the feeling that hurt most, sent a physical pain shooting into my stomach. Mama and Zofia had already abandoned me years earlier, but not by choice, by getting sick and dying. And though I was so very sad that I'd become listless then, I was not angry, too, the way I was now. Kazimierz was not dying. He was very much alive, and he claimed he loved me. I *knew* he loved me. And yet he had left me anyway.

*It is not my choice, you see, Marya, he had said to me hours earlier. My parents will not allow us to marry.* We had walked along the path toward the river, away from his parents' manor

house in Szczuki, my younger charges, his younger siblings, taking their afternoon rests. Kazimierz held on to my hand, the way he always did when we walked together in the afternoons, but now that he was delivering terrible news, terrible words I did not want to hear, he gripped me tightly. My wrist began to ache, and I pulled out of his grasp. *I have no choice*, he said again, when I pulled away. *Marya, please.*

“You have a choice,” I’d told him. “There is always a choice.” That very idea was what had gotten me through months and months of being a governess for the Zorawskis before Kazimierz had arrived. I did not want to care for children. I did not even enjoy them the way my sister Hela did. My mind ached to learn. I’d dedicated every evening to self-study since I’d been in Szczuki, and though I’d arrived here equally enamored with literature, sociology, and science, in the past few years I’d decided that science was what I wanted to study at university. But to do so I would need to earn enough money to move out of Russian Poland, where women were not allowed to be or do anything of import, and most definitely not allowed to attend university.

I had planned to move to Paris to be with my older sister, Bronia, before I’d fallen in love with Kazimierz. We’d even had a deal, Bronia and I—I would work and send her money while she earned her medical degree, and then I would move to Paris, and she would work as a doctor and help put me through university. I had made my own choice: act as a governess for just a few years until I could afford to do what I really wanted. Here Kazimierz was, *a man*, and an intelligent one at that, and he was claiming *he had no choice*.

“What would you have me do, Marya?” he’d asked me, grabbing my hand again, lowering to his knees as if he were

begging me to understand him, to forgive him, which of course, I wouldn't. "If I disobey my parents they would disown me, and then . . ."

"And then, what?" I'd snapped, pulling away again. "We would be penniless together? Or, what is it you said your mother said about me, I am *worthless*? I'll never amount to anything?"

"I do love you," he'd said softly.

"Do you?" I'd asked him, and then when he didn't say anything else, I'd turned and run back to the house alone.

I'd spent the rest of the afternoon crying in my bed, not even bothering to tend to the children when they woke from their naps. How could I continue to be their governess now knowing what Pani Zorawska truly thought of me? Now knowing that Kazimierz agreed with her, that he and I could not be together.

I threw everything into my valise, and after the house grew dark, the night quiet, I snuck out without so much as even a goodbye to my employers. I put my bag on my shoulder and walked into town to hire a carriage to drive me through the beet sugar plantations that seemed to stretch for an eternity—it was a five-hour carriage ride to the closest train station. But I would use all the rubles I had left to pay the carriage man, then the train back to Warsaw, back to Papa and Hela. And I would arrive home, truly penniless.

BACK IN WARSAW, I STAYED IN BED, AND WHAT MUST PAPA and Hela have thought? *Poor Marya, too thin, too fragile, and destined to be unloved forever.* Hela was my closest sister in age—she was just one year older than me, and I had always been so advanced in school that we'd been placed in the same grade at the female gymnasium as girls. We had been something like twins,

and she was the one I'd written to about Kazimierz the past few years. I'd even told her the secret I'd told no one else, that we'd been engaged. But all I would tell her when I first returned home was that it was over, and that I did not wish to talk about it.

"Marya," Hela called for me through my bedroom door, her voice so high and sweet like a songbird. I wanted to go to her, to hold on to her, the way I had as a young girl when our oldest sister, Zofia, had died. But the absence of Kazimierz was a heaviness in my chest, and I could not move. I pretended to be asleep, turning on my side, and squeezing my eyes tightly shut.

Hela opened the door, called my name again into the darkness. I didn't answer her, or move. "You're not the only one," she finally said, before giving up, shutting the door behind her.

And part of me wanted to ask her what she meant; the other part of me wanted to sleep forever.

ONE AFTERNOON, A FEW WEEKS AFTER RETURNING TO WARSAW, Papa knocked on my bedroom door, and unlike Hela, he walked right in, without waiting for my answer. "It's time to get up, get ready," he said.

My mind felt dull, my body listless. I was weak from hunger, or disappointment, but I had no desire to get up and eat or live my life. "I have nothing to get ready for," I moaned. Eventually, I supposed I would have to get out of bed and try to secure another governess position, but I could not face that prospect yet. Bronia was just about finished with her degree, and she said I could move in with her and her new husband in Paris, but I would need enough money to register for classes and pay my fees, and I had nothing to my name. *Penniless*.

"You are leaving for Paris soon," Papa said, brightly. He

walked to my window and threw open the curtains. “There is much to be done.”

“Paris?” I sat up in my bed, squinting my eyes to adjust to the sunlight streaming in. “I cannot afford Paris yet. I quit the Zorawskis, remember?”

“I have some money saved that will help cover your first year of tuition at the Sorbonne. You can begin classes in November.”

“But Papa . . . I can’t let you do that. You can’t possibly have enough money for that.”

*The Sorbonne.* Even the very idea of it felt like a confection for my mind, and my body hummed, alive again, in a way it hadn’t been since I’d left Kazimierz in the woods, weeks earlier.

“Helena and I will get by. You need to go and get your university education,” Papa said. “You are brilliant, Marya. And you have worked so hard, for so many years. You deserve this.”

Who was right—Papa or Pani Zorawska? Was I brilliant or worthless? But Papa was going to help me get to Paris. That was enough to get me out of bed.

I stood up and kissed his cheek. “Thank you,” I said to him.

He embraced me, kissed the top of my head. “You will thank me by earning your degree at the Sorbonne.”

That night I did not dream about Kazimierz or the way his kisses had left the feel of sunshine upon my skin as we’d traversed the woods, hand in hand. Instead I dreamed about the beautiful laboratories that surely awaited me now. The fantasy lingered in my mind in the moments after waking the next morning, leaving a sweetness in my mouth like I’d just eaten a *kolachke*, the jam still on my tongue. Paris was waiting for me, only two train rides away now: everything I’d ever wanted.

*Well, almost everything.*

THE MORNING I WAS TO LEAVE, PAPA OFFERED TO WALK WITH me to the train station to help me with my things. Hela hugged me goodbye at our apartment door, saying it would be too hard, too emotional to say goodbye at the train. She was right. I already felt teary-eyed as Papa and I walked the short distance, mostly in silence.

I was not bringing much, and did not truly need Papa's help, but I was glad for his quiet company all the same. I had only a folding chair to sit on—my fourth-class ticket did not come with a seat—and one suitcase of belongings. My suitcase was heavy, as it contained more books for the long ride than clothing. I only owned a few dresses, and I had sent the rest of my things ahead by freight.

"You take care of yourself," Papa was saying now. "And remember to eat." Papa was always saying I was too thin, and truth be told I did have a habit of forgetting food when my mind was otherwise engaged. Whether it was Kazimierz or my studies.

"Don't worry, Papa. Bronia will keep me fed." If Hela was my sister-twin, Bronia was my sister-mother. She was the oldest, and most responsible, and when we were younger, after our mother died, she was the one who'd stepped into the mothering role in our household. Even all these years later, even living so far away, her worry for me and Hela came through in her letters.

"And you have all your papers in order?" Papa asked, though he had already asked before we'd left the apartment. He was nervous about the Russian officers examining me too closely on the checkpoints out of Poland, a woman traveling alone and with

the *Skłodowska* last name. Years ago, before I was born, Papa had been involved in the January uprising against the Russian army—it was how we’d lost our family’s money and property and become poor in the first place. But in the years since, the Russians had many others to worry about. The Skłodowskis kept out of their way. And Bronia had traveled this route herself several times with no trouble.

“You know I do, Papa,” I reassured him. “You worry too much.”

“I can’t help it. I worry because I love you, my dear sweet Marya,” he said as we arrived at the station.

We both stopped walking, and I grabbed Papa in a tight embrace. I couldn’t hold back tears any longer, and for just a moment, I buried my wet cheek into the stale wool of his jacket. I’d already been away from him and Hela for years in Szczuki, but this felt different. Paris was so far—forty hours by train. And Papa was placing all his money, all his trust, in me to succeed at the Sorbonne, something we’d long thought out of reach for me, growing up both poor and female in Warsaw.

In the distance, we could hear the whistle of the train approaching. I let go of the embrace, picked up my things, and stepped closer to the tracks. The city of Warsaw, majestic and gray and stifling, would be behind me now. And suddenly, I felt lighter, dizzy with excitement at what lay ahead of me.

AS THE TRAIN PULLED INTO THE STATION, I THOUGHT I HEARD my name in the distance, from somewhere across the street. I ignored it, sure I was imagining it, because it sounded just like Kazimierz’s voice.

But then I heard it again: “Marya, wait!”

I turned around, and there he was, running across the street, waving his arms. Kazimierz was tall and lovely, with a long face and deep-brown brooding eyes. Now he was red-faced, and sweating, out of breath from running. The fall air was crisp, and it suddenly chilled me. All of my skin turned to ice. My own voice froze inside my throat, and I could not respond.

Papa turned toward Kazimierz and frowned. "What is happening?" he asked, turning back to me. He knew about Kazimierz, but only in a general way. Kaz was the man who'd broken his daughter's heart, who did not believe she would ever be good enough to marry him.

"What are you doing here?" I put my suitcase down, put my hands on my hips, and demanded an explanation of my own.

He stood in front of me, his breath jagged. "You can't go," he said, glancing behind me at the train, which had begun to board. "Wherever it is you are going, you . . . you can't. Stay here. Stay with me." His voice broke, making him sound desperate in a way I hadn't heard before. My love for him ran through my body, a shiver.

"How did you even find me?" I asked. The question slipped out, but what I truly meant to ask was *why*? Why was he here? His parents disapproved of us; he would never disappoint his parents or risk them disowning him, making him penniless, just like me. That's what he'd told me, wasn't it?

"I went to your apartment first. Helena told me maybe I could still catch you, before it was too late."

"Too late?" I asked.

Papa stepped from behind me and put his hand on Kazimierz's shoulder. "I think it's best you leave." Papa spoke calmly, but forcefully. He was not a menacing man—Kazimierz was

several inches taller, but Papa seemed to grow in that moment, and Kazimierz took a step back.

"I love her," he said to Papa now, not me. "I want her to be my wife."

"But your parents," I said.

"I don't care about my parents. There is no one in all of Poland, no, all of the world, as smart and as beautiful as you, Marya. Remember that last afternoon, skating on the river, what you told me?" I had told him that he steadied me, that my entire life had been one giant river of ice before him: I kept falling and falling and falling, being so poor and often prone to bouts of emotional darkness. But holding on to him, I knew I wouldn't fall any longer. "Well, it is the same for me," he was saying now. "I have been falling these last weeks without you."

"Marya is on her way to Paris," Papa said, bringing me back, here.

"Paris," Kazimierz exhaled, and his face fell. He knew about my deal with Bronia, but after we had gotten engaged, we had agreed that I would stay in Poland instead, that I could be his wife and teach at a girls' gymnasium, the way Hela did. I wanted to attend university, but I was not going to upend my life over it if I had love, if I had him, here in Poland.

"You can write letters," Papa was saying now.

Friends wrote each other letters; siblings wrote each other letters. Husbands and wives did not live half a continent apart.

Kazimierz turned back to me, grabbed my hands. Not squeezing them hard, but gently now, and I warmed again at his touch. "Please, Marya. Stay here with me. Marry me. Our love means more to you than university. You said so. And if Paris is really that important to you, we can go there together, someday, after I get my degree here."

I had told him that, too, skating on the ice-covered river in Szczuki: *his love meant more to me than university*. But that was when the Sorbonne still felt so far away, perpetually out of my reach. Now, I wasn't so sure.

I looked from Kaz to Papa. Papa was frowning; Kaz was smiling. His smile was infectious. I could not let go of his hand. I wanted to go to Paris, wanted to continue my studies, but I wanted to be with the man I loved, too.

And then I made a choice.

# MARYA

*Poland, 1891–1892*

*You have a choice. There is always a choice.*

**Y** Kazimierz and I chose each other. We were married a month after that day on the train platform. I became Marya Zorawska at a small church in Warsaw with only Papa and Hela in attendance. His parents disowned him, as they'd promised they would, refused to speak to him, or come to our wedding, or give him any money. But I had never had money, and anyway, what was money when we had love? We had each other, and that was everything.

I worried Papa would be disappointed in me, but at my wedding, the only thing I could detect on his face was joy. *My sweet Marya.* He held on to me and kissed my cheeks after the ceremony. *All I want is for you to be happy.*

*I am very happy,* I assured him. And I was. I really was. The periods of my life where I had felt sadness weighing me down, darkening my every thought, felt behind me. Being with Kazimierz filled me with an all-consuming sort of joy and contentment that I could never remember feeling in my life before. At

least not since Mama had died of tuberculosis when I was ten. Being with him made me feel permanently steady.

Hela told me she envied me, and she admitted that she had been in love with a man in Warsaw when I was in Szczuki. Josef had told her he couldn't marry her because she was poor. *You're not the only one*, she'd said into my darkness.

"You did the right thing," Hela said to me, just after my wedding. And with the reassurance of my sister-twin, I felt even more certain, even happier.

Only Bronia, who could not make it back to Poland for the wedding, expressed her doubts in a letter. *We had an arrangement*, she wrote. *I want you to come to Paris and get your education. I owe you for all the help you gave me in achieving my degree.* Bronia, our sister-mother, always wanted everything to be fair. *And besides, you cannot pass up your chance for an education.*

I wrote her back and told her not to worry about old promises, or owing me anything. I told her I still could come to Paris in time, but there wasn't any rush. Education would be there, whenever we could afford it. And besides, she must understand how I was feeling—she had recently found love herself, married a doctor, also named Kazimierz. Papa now had a running joke that if only we could find a third Kazimierz, Hela would finally be happy, too.

Then Bronia found out she was carrying a child, and it was joyous news, and she had more to worry about than her little sister. Her letters came less frequently, and when they arrived they were filled with details of her condition.

And I did not need her to worry about me anymore. Now I had a husband for that.

WE WERE POOR, BUT WE WOULDN'T BE FOREVER, WE PROMISED each other that. Kazimierz had a brilliant mind for mathematics. He'd almost completed his doctoral studies in analytical geometry, and he was able to secure a teaching position at a secondary school in Loksow, a small city about an hour train ride from Warsaw. He had been accepted into a program at Jagiellonian University in Krakow, to obtain his complete doctorate in mathematics. But without his parents' support, we could not afford for him to enroll or for us to live in the beautiful and cultural city of Krakow, in Austrian Poland. Kazimierz said it didn't matter, that we would save up, and we could move, he could enroll in another year or two.

"And Paris," I reminded him, each time Bronia's letters arrived. Eventually we would go to Paris, and I would do my coursework at the Sorbonne.

"Yes, of course, my darling." Kazimierz kissed the top of my head. "Someday, Paris."

But for now, Kazimierz had a job in Poland, and after our wedding, we moved from Warsaw to Loksow. We rented a tiny one-room apartment above a bakery for seven rubles a month, and all the day long the smells of bread drifted up into our one-room, taunting us. We did not have money for enough food, or enough coal to heat our room regularly in winter. But never mind that. We had each other.

In bed at night, Kazimierz wrapped his large arms around me, pulled me in close to his body, holding on to me while he slept. His breath matched my breath. *Steady*. And we fit together perfectly. I slept enveloped in a cocoon of love and happiness, and I was plenty warm and plenty full.

IN WARSAW, IN THE YEARS BEFORE I BECAME A GOVERNESS, I had taken classes at the Flying University. In Russian Poland it was illegal for women to obtain a university education, and the Flying University classes were taught in secret, the locations ever changing to avoid detection. I'd learned about chemistry and physics and literature. In Loksow, though, there was nothing of the sort. And after we had been living there for three months, I announced to Kazimierz over a dinner that I was going to start a Flying University myself.

"What, *kochanie*?" He was distracted, grading student exams at the table while we ate. He did not mean to ignore me, but it was the best time of evening and best place in our apartment to get any light, as the late spring sun had not yet set and our only window framed our tiny table.

"Flying University," I said again. "I want to start one here, in Loksow. Women here need a university. *I* need a university." I made circles with my spoon in the dinner I'd made, a clear broth that I had tried (and failed) to make more interesting by adding an aging potato.

During the day while Kazimierz taught, I worked as a governess for twin boys. The Kaminskis were a family Kazimierz had known from his other, wealthier life, and they were not put off by the fact that his parents had disowned him, since I was cheap labor for them. But at night I longed for more. I read Kazimierz's books, but that wasn't enough. I wanted stimulating conversation and experiments and problem solving, and most of all, a community. My entire life, other than in Szczuki, I'd had people to learn alongside: first banned Polish books as bedtime stories and discussions with Papa and my sisters,

later the Flying University classes I attended with Bronia in Warsaw.

Kazimierz finally put down the exam he'd been focusing on and looked up. His eyes were dark brown, nearly black, and I had stared at them enough times now to understand the subtle differences in his expression between desire and anger, worry and hunger. Now, his eyes were filled only with worry. "I'll teach you maths at night if you want to learn something."

"Oh, Kaz," I said. "You're already exhausted from teaching all day. And besides, I want to find other women like me to interact with." I'd done years of self-study in Szczuki, I was ready for so much more. And as much as I loved my husband, it was lonely here in Loksow with no family, no friends, and no learning opportunities outside our apartment.

"But a secret university? That sounds much too dangerous, Marya. If you were caught, you could be arrested, jailed."

"I won't be caught." I did not want to be arrested, but maybe there were worse things. My mind felt numb, soft, restless. I itched to exercise it among new people and new studies.

"I don't like the idea," Kazimierz said. He covered my hand with his. "I couldn't bear the thought of anything ever happening to you, my beautiful sweet Marya."

"But it won't," I promised him. "Bronia and I attended classes in Warsaw before I met you and everything was fine." Truth be told, there had been a scare or two, a raid from time to time. A woman I'd actually known in my chemistry class, Petra, had disappeared, rumored to have been arrested. But there'd also been another rumor circulating about an illicit affair, a baby, and though I never saw her again, all the danger had felt muted, far away. I let myself believe she had moved somewhere else, out

in the countryside, with a family perhaps. "I will start something small," I promised Kazimierz. "For a few women. We will only meet once a week. I need this," I said again.

Kazimierz sighed. He knew me well enough to know that nothing he might say now, no worry he might have was going to change my mind. He squeezed my hand. "Just promise me you'll be careful," he finally said.

"Of course, darling." I leaned across the table and kissed him once softly on the lips to mollify him. I sat back down and began to chart it in my head, how I could begin this university, where I would even start.

Kazimierz was still staring at me, and he put the exam down again, reached his hands up to hold on to my shoulders and pull me closer to him. He kissed me, more forcefully than before, as if to remind me that he was here, that he was the most important thing. And he was.

But we were going to get to Paris, I was going to go to a real university eventually. And in the meantime, I had to prepare as much as I could, so I would be ready.

# MARIE



*Paris, France, 1891*

*You have a choice. There is always a choice.*

I get on the train to Paris, leaving Kazimierz still standing at the station, looking as though I trampled upon his heart. But my own heart feels free, bursting with so much possibility for my future. The heavy sinking cloud that had crushed my thoughts and my hopes, working so many dull years as a governess, begins to lift as the train pulls away from Warsaw. My university education is finally within my grasp, after all these years. Maybe my *love* for Kazimierz had not been love at all, as now the prospect of giving up university, *for him*, does not feel even remotely right to me the way it had only months earlier, skating in Szczuki.

Forty long and uncomfortable hours later, Bronia is waiting for me at the station in Paris. She completed her course of study in obstetrics and is a married woman now—having fallen in love with another doctor, a Polish man, a political dissident exiled from Russian Poland.

It is wonderful to see her again, and my heart swells further. She looks so beautiful, so happy and so grown up and . . . it can't

be! I rest my hand gently on the round bulge of her belly, before I even give her a hug. “You are having a baby?” I ask, stunned that my sister is about to be a real mother to her own child, not just a sister-mother to me and Hela. And, that she has kept this last bit of news from me until now.

“Yes.” She laughs a little and holds me tightly to her, kissing the top of my head. She smoothes back the wisps of my blond hair that have come loose from my bun on the very long journey. “You are going to be a *tante*.” She quickly corrects herself in Polish: “*Ciotka*, I mean.”

“*Tante*,” I repeat back, the French word both foreign and delightful on my tongue.

BRONIA AND HER HUSBAND LIVE IN A SMALL APARTMENT IN La Villete, on rue d’Allemagne, an hour and two horse-drawn omnibus rides away from the Sorbonne.

I take a few days to unpack my things and settle in, and then Bronia draws me out a map. I manage to navigate the omnibuses into the city for the first time alone, without getting lost. And as I walk the rue Saint-Jacques to go and register for my classes, I’ve never felt such a lightness, such a happiness before. In Poland, a woman cannot simply walk into a university, pay the fees, and register. But in Paris—anything is possible!

I do not feel at all like that same girl, that same woman, who had been skating through life as a lovesick penniless governess, not too long ago, in Szczuki. And when I sign my registration card, instead of *Marya*, I write *Marie*. The French version of my name seems more suitable for my new life here, as a student, as a scientist. In Paris *Marie* can be anything or anyone. And I vow to leave that sad and listless *Marya* behind.

"ARE YOU AWAKE?" BRONIA'S VOICE CUTS THROUGH THE DARKNESS of my bedroom.

"Yes," I say. "Sorry, did I wake you, Bron?" It is November third, the morning I am officially to become a student of the Faculty of Science at the Sorbonne, and I've been awake since the middle of the night, unable to get back to sleep, my mind and body restless, eager and excited.

"No," Bronia says, lifting the curtain a bit now, only to reveal darkness. "I heard you rustling around in here. But it was the baby who woke me." Bronia sighs. "Should I make some coffee?" she asks. "I'm not falling back to sleep."

"Neither am I," I admit. "Will we wake up Mier?"

"He'll be fine," Bronia says dismissively. I feel a little bad for my brother-in-law, who is kind, but also quiet—no match for the two independently minded sisters who now inhabit his apartment. Mier is short for Kazimierz, and every time Bron has said his name these past few weeks I couldn't help but think about my own Kazimierz standing on the train platform in Warsaw. But I do not regret my choice. And besides, my brother-in-law is nothing like him. Mier's love and adoration for Bronia are so clear on his face each time he glances at her, and he agrees to *everything* Bronia asks of him, anything to make her happy and fulfilled. He would never ask her to choose him over medicine, and that alone makes me quite fond of him.

Bronia leaves to start our coffee, and I rise and dress in the darkness. I don't have many dresses to choose from, and I pull one blindly out of the wardrobe, not caring which one it is. I spent all of Papa's rubles on my tuition and registration fees,

with none left for new clothing or anything else now. I'm relying on Bronia for food and shelter. And anyway, I don't care about how I look. As long as it covers me, any dress will do. I wrap my blond hair back into a tight bun and then walk into the dining room to share a coffee with my sister.

"Are you nervous?" Bronia asks, handing me a cup.

"Nervous? What is there to be nervous about?" I laugh, the sound coming out higher than normal, and I realize, yes, perhaps I am a bit nervous.

"You will most likely be the only woman in your physics classes today," Bronia says matter-of-factly. "And the men will not take kindly to you doing better than them." From the slightly bitter edge to her voice, I'm certain Bronia experienced something similar when she began her medical course a few years earlier. Though the letters she had written to me had conveyed nothing of the sort—they had been filled only with how much she'd been learning, the joy she found in all the medical knowledge and practice.

I shake my head. Who cares about the men? If I'm nervous about anything, it's that deep down, Pani Zorawska might be right about me. That I'm not good enough, that I will never amount to anything. Perhaps the courses will be too hard or I'll run out of money before I earn my degree. I can't imagine how I would feel to return to Poland both penniless and also a failure.

Outside the apartment window, the sun begins to rise, and the sky glows orange and purple. I finish my coffee and take a deep breath. Nervous or not, I am more than ready. My years of self-study have taken me as far as I will ever get on my own. Now I need brilliant professors, access to laboratories. "I should leave," I tell Bronia. "I want to arrive early."

Bronia reaches across the table, grabs my hand and squeezes it. “Good luck, *ma petite soeur*.” My little sister.

I’ve been practicing my French these past few weeks: “*Merci, ma grande soeur*,” I answer back.

THE SORBONNE IS UNDERGOING A RENOVATION, WHICH IS only partway done, and as a result, the noise of men with shovels and hammers echoes off rue Saint-Jacques, and my first lecture has been relocated to an old house alongside the street. I arrive an hour before class begins, and take the chair closest to the front. The rest of the students file in after me and sit behind me inside the dusty parlor.

The professor stands directly in front of me—an older, balding man with a long white beard, dressed in a black jacket with tails, a long white tie. He looks more like he’s dressed for a dinner party than a laboratory, other than the chalk dust marking up his sleeves. His clothing is another reminder of how important, how much bigger, this class is compared to any other I’ve ever taken before. I swallow back the nervous swell in my chest, the coffee washing back up, burning the back of my throat.

He begins to call out the names of the students one by one, and when he says *Marie*, then terribly mispronounces my last name—*Sokol—ow—ska*—I don’t respond at first, not realizing he’s talking to me. A man behind me taps me on the shoulder. All eyes are upon me now, and my cheeks redden with embarrassment. Of course, everyone else knows whose name the professor is calling. Looking around, I am, as Bronia had predicted, the only woman in the room.

“*Oui, présente*,” I call out quickly, feeling the hotness from my face creep to my neck as I raise my hand. Professor Appel

checks me off and moves on, calling out the names of the remaining men.

Someone whispers loud enough for me to hear: *Who is that foreign woman with the beautiful hair?* Foreign woman? Beautiful hair?

Another man says: *A pretty little thing like her in the physics course? Is she lost?*

There are snickers, but Professor ignores them, continuing to call the roll.

So I am allowed in, unlike in Poland, and yet, none of these men will take me seriously? *Pretty little thing*. Is that all anyone will see me as here?

My embarrassment is quickly replaced by annoyance. Bronia told me this would happen, and I'm determined now not to let it bother me, ruin my first morning of classes. I stare straight ahead, eyes eagerly trained on Professor Appel in his elegant tails, pretending there is nothing else, no one else, in this room but his voice.

Anyway, I am not here to make friends. I am here to learn, to be the best in physics. I will show them all.