

Translation

1

Then I told her that she would not survive, that she would not carry on, that she was simply killing herself.

“Fear God,” I said, and repeated it several times, entirely unknowingly. But I didn’t feel anything like this yet except for a kind of resentment that I couldn’t notice the drama, even though it was right in front of me, and that I wasn’t aware of the most important thing in the life of the person whom I had a right to call my best friend. People don’t like to be misinformed, they don’t like to carry a false image of their fellow creatures, even if they are unable to create true ones; these were her words. It turned out that I wasn’t capable of doing it either, and immediately I felt hurt. I said, “Fear God,” and I silenced myself looking at her whom I had known for so many years, through so many conversations, so many tensions and so much anger, through this entire long course of friendship. And suddenly besides resentment I felt a shadow of satisfaction.

Throughout all those years I could not keep up with her: she initiated, around herself and by herself, so many people, so many tensions, happenings, various discoveries and revelations, so many moods, never swimming with the same wave. I always ran behind, I could only participate and comment on her vivid life, I could only have what she brought to me of that life, what she laid out for me in conversations, confessions, interactions. She was so unsettled, so ubiquitous, so curious about everything; only pretty women, or women considered pretty, look good with this type of restlessness, and even that is not enough. Either way I could not be like that—I would be seen as inquisitive.

And then I thought that here I have her, that I had caught her entirely, not only a finger or a thought or a mood. And I also thought that she had come, that she had turned to me of her own initiative. That she had given herself into my hands, and I didn't have to catch up with her, beg her for a conversation, for a meeting just between the two of us. Because I was always jealous about all those matters of hers: the people, the phone calls, her leaving and returning, about her participation in everything and about the participation that everyone had in her.

But now she came to me herself and said that she could no longer hide from me the most important thing in her life.

"Everything else is less important," she said. And from this place also originated my resentment, because throughout all these years and throughout all of our deepest conversations I had only known the "less important," and she had known everything about me; maybe because there was no "less important" in me, in my life. From this place also came the satisfaction that the living stream of things and people, of joys and failures, all that I had envied her for was not what she lived in. What she lived in was bad, bitter, false at the very roots. And I had thought that she, the envied one, was simply unhappy.

"Everything else is less important," she said. And then I started repeating my "Fear God." She was lying in a chair, wearing a green skirt, tanned from the first days of May, she was twirling a lock of black hair in her fingers, and I stood between the kitchen and the hallway with a kettle in my hands, and I remember that she suddenly started up or rather slipped off the chair with those wavy half-moves and half-turns of hers. The heels of her shoes knocked on the floor. Agata got hold of the kettle. She said imperiously,

“You don’t threaten me with God. Don’t threaten me with God. And sit down. I’m dying for tea.”

We had often spent entire hours drinking tea, both curled up on the sofa, and it was she who brewed very dark and aromatic tea, which she had taught me to drink and like. Now again she brought me a mug, and like a small animal she nestled down on the sofa, the huge mug steaming between her palms; I could never convince her to have her tea in something that looked more like a tea cup. “I like a lot,” she would say stubbornly and would stubbornly insist that really it is never “a lot,” even five or ten cups. She herself found among my cups this blue mug with big white spots. “I had the same one when I was little,” she said with contentment, and even when we were not alone, when we laid the colorful tea set in front of guests, the set which Agata had brought me one year from Cepelia for my name day, even then I had to serve her tea in this ugly mug.

With surprise I noticed that everything was as always. Agata broke open a new pack of cigarettes, she slipped her shoes from her feet, she gave that small animal sigh of hers, her face, supported on her elbow, was small and round. She turned the dial of the radio, the room sounded with the charming voice of Eartha Kitt. I was watching her through mist. I didn’t want to allow myself to be pushed into our old familiar world which to her turned out to be only “less important.” She said, “my old friend,” her voice was down to earth and questioning. I heard the light sound of bracelets; I thought she would hug me, I cried openly—and because of my fear of her tears, because of my fear of her despair opening up, I realized that I didn’t want her to start counting on my strength, on the streams flowing inside me.

“My old friend,” Agata said, and she said something more, and I thought that I must have misunderstood her. I raised my head, the skin on my cheeks tightened from the drying tears, I looked at that face small and round.

“How?” I asked. “How?” And I thought that she went crazy. Because she said it again.

“I am happy.”

2

Long before that, before she said that, Pawel sat with me on this chair, with his features half childishly soft, his lips trembling like those of a crying girl. A few days before I had walked them to the train station; they were both wearing pants, sweaters, and backpacks, I was jealous of their trip to the lakes, and I looked down on her for it. “You have two tents?” I asked expectantly. “Idiot,” Agata said confidently.

A few days later Pawel knocked on my door. He looked tanned, but underneath the tan he was gray. On the threshold he said that Agata had left.

The third morning of their excursion Pawel had woken up very early, or rather he had been wakened by her, he had seen her foot disappear in the opening of the tent, the wind blowing the material. “Zip up,” he heard Agata’s voice from outside. “It’s windy.” He fell back to sleep. It was only when he woke up two or three hours later that he noticed only one backpack remaining in the tent. She left a letter, a small piece of paper impaled on a stake. “In a few years it would have been much harder. It’s my fault, but how could I know. You were my first one. A.”

“It was good,” said Pawel. “Sabina, listen. Explain it to me. Explain it to her. Listen, Sabina, it was good.”

“Where is she?”

“In Kazimierz.”

“How do you know?”

“She telegraphed me here, in Warsaw. She was afraid that I’d think...when she disappeared like that...”

“Were you there?”

He had come to me straight from there. He found Agata on the beach, far from town; a piece of snow-white cloth around the bulrush, on the opposite side of Wisla’s tower in the castle of Janowiec, behind the steep shining the quarry. Agata was laying on her stomach, her head in the bend of her elbow.

“This is unnecessary,” she said as he approached. He put his hand on her neck, he caressed her neck as he spoke, I knew he suffered; he loved her. Agata got up, she slipped her dress on over her head, she had the eyes of an enemy, Pawel said; he noisily swallowed his saliva.

“Why did you come here? I want to be alone.”

“Agata.”

“No.”

They stood in the heavy sun, a sea swallow screamed, farther in the distance there was Kazimierz, it looked as if Pawel held it in his hand; they had been here together once, maybe a year before, and Agata had sung on the beach all day. Their wedding had been scheduled for September, it was June.

He called, “why?!” His knees were shaking, he sat down. And she sat next to him, and she hugged him; he started kissing her eyes salty and closed, and they laid down

there on the hot sand, and she agreed to everything and it was good. But when he raised his head from her breasts, he saw her eyes open, staring straight into the sun. He pulled away, hurt.

She said, “Pawel, this is not love.”

“Agata.”

“I never suffered because of you. And you never suffered because of me. I am so unnecessary to you. And you to me. Give me a cigarette.”

They lit a match, the wind blew it out, Agata’s black hair hit Pawel’s face, his hands were shaking.

“You love somebody else.”

“Can you really not understand?!” she screamed. Screamed the sea swallow, the church bells resounded. Agata said more quietly, suddenly perfectly calm, she put her hands around her knees (her face was fascinated, fascinated, said Pawel).

“I want to be happy.”

That’s how he left her. He walked to the edge of the path, he stood under the wall of the quarry, he looked at the cloth and at Wisla.

They didn’t see each other again. Pawel wrote to her, but she wouldn’t respond; I thought she should have.

“You are too proper!” Agata said ironically in response to my comment. “Do you think he cares for a mere gesture of courtesy?”

I could not comprehend how one could be with someone completely—when I found out from Pawel that they had been together, it was a shock—and suddenly leave. It was bad enough that she had slept with him; and this unreasonable break-up? “You are

entirely amoral,” I said to her once. We walked on Ujazdowske, we passed people strolling, Agata stopped with tears in her eyes, as she tended to.

“Sleeping with someone can be as immoral in marriage as outside of it,” she said. “Understand. As immoral; if nothing else happens. Would you rather I slept with him for the rest of my life, just like that, as if I were eating bread with butter?”

People were looking at us, some woman hissed. I caught Agata’s hand, forced her into the park, we sat on the bench.

“But you said that nothing changed between the two of you. And yet, you suddenly broke up with him.”

She drew a big X in the sand, the stick broke in her hand.

“Sabina, at least you try to understand. It’s simple. The fact that nothing changed between us, that’s the reason. I made two mistakes: first, when I thought it was love, and second, when I agreed to marriage. And this entire time nothing changed—inside me nothing changed. This means I was empty—empty inside, do you understand? It was pleasurable. Pleasurable!” She purred.

A pigeon chased a sparrow next to our feet, she pushed the pigeon away, but the sparrow flew away.

“Two whole years, and it was all for nothing?” I asked.

She raised her voice angrily. “What do you mean for nothing? And this, that I learned...what love is not, is this nothing?”

3

I remember everything, Borys, I am like an anti-novel; you know: past tense, past perfect, future tense, things unimportant and important, everything mixed up, but nothing

missing. You press one key, and twenty respond. I used to think it was handicap, misfortune, that because of the ability to remember everything—the important and necessary with the unimportant and the unnecessary—I am like trash on which lay shredded things, broken things, things that are useless, garbage in which nothing healthy can grow nor even be preserved. It was only she who taught me to expect the most from this. She was the one who said that people lose mostly out of fear of remembering. We grow old, she would say, not because there are more and more memories, faces, events, finalities, affairs, but because we walk away from them, because we allow the distance to grow inside us. She must have said this to you too, because in her journal she expressed anger over your respect for the past and the distance to it, that commonly known notion according to which memory is like a folder, a folder scrupulously counting profit and expenditure, a folder for which only the final number is of importance, the sum. “Maybe it is wisdom,” she wrote, “but not for a human being, not here on earth.”

At first I thought that she meant the impossibility of enclosing a human being, everything that constitutes the human being, in a sum, in one conclusion. But no, there was also this sentence: “Nothing that was given to a human being was given for nothing; nothing that he does will be forgotten. God, if He really exists, must be a Perfect Memory.” Her God was something more incomprehensible than the God commonly known; this God of hers drove me insane, but wait, now I want to talk of something else, I don’t want to begin with that which is most confusing.

So it was she who taught me to expect the most from this “garbage.” Besides, she also remembered everything, she also looked at the world’s details, at the field, the people in the tram, she picked up, collected all of this like a badger—but she could talk

about it, unlike me. With her, yes, with her I could do it too. When it was just the two of us alone we would fall into this jumble of all tenses, the important and the unimportant, as one falls into the light of truth.

If not from there, not from this memory, from this attempt to recreate the past, if it doesn't come from this today, then it will not come at all.

4

Many years had passed since my conversation with Pawel, and one day she told me she was happy. Have a cigarette, Borys, wait, give me one too. This is what I understand least; you know more about this than I: she was happy with you. And maybe not with you, but with the love for you, I don't know. But she was happy. I saw her. I know. But I don't know how it could be. If she lived a monastic existence, as a saint or nun, I would understand. But the way she lived had nothing to do with a monastic existence.

Do you know what dress she had on when she first met you? You see, I do know, and I also know that she didn't notice anything special about you, no sign, no warning; she was having fun at the party, and she mocked me. At that "ball" I performed for the first time the role of a happy wife. The three of us came together, she and Joseph and I. As usual, she was without a partner, and women, as usual, didn't like that. At the ceremony all my co-workers were surrounded by families, a boring party with old friends, their wives and cousins. But Agata had a great time. Neither Joseph nor I danced, and she was wild.

Nothing happened that day. She didn't get a sign, she didn't hear a warning, I looked at her often and I know that she didn't dance with you more than she did with

others. I wouldn't have remembered you from that evening if it weren't for Teresa. Because she was the first one to know.

I always wore low heels, I thought that stilettos were not for me; besides, ever since childhood I've worn sporty dresses. That is, I thought they were sporty and suited me, and it was Agata who announced that they were not dresses at all. She successfully filled me with disgust for sacks and eternal collars going all the way up to the neck. But it took me a while to say "yes" to high heels. But I enjoyed looking at them, it was a passion which I tried to hide with a big effort.

My matches fell down, Joseph sat too far away to reach them, so I bent below the chairs and saw someone's stilettos.

They were black, narrow, with pointy toe and deeply cut; the slender heels could not have been taller than three centimeters, the kind that would be later imported to Poland, and much later produced here. Enviously I thought, "Wow!" and looked at the owner.

The woman sat on a chair, three quarters of her body turned towards me; I didn't know her. The dark dress did not hide her bony knees and flaccid breasts, the thin hands looked as if cut out of a box. I wouldn't have remembered her, her face was neither pretty nor ugly, not very young and rather sickly, and I didn't know why I was looking at this face, why I was so drawn to it, until I saw that the direction of her head was not the same as the direction of her body, that her neck was unnaturally tense, struggling to look at what her body moved away from. That was what I saw, and then her gaze: sharp, dry, unwilling eyes, eyes chasing something that was almost beyond the direction into which the head was looking. I saw how she put a smile on her lips, tried to prolong it, a pleasant

and protective smile; it looked as if she was fighting a big battle, her smile kept on disappearing, swam away, and she called it back, placing it on the thin layer of her cheeks, on the corner of the disobedient lips. Her gaze did not belong to the visage facing me, it didn't belong to the smile so stubbornly offered to the dancing crowd; it followed something mobile, something that kept on moving: it was a hard shining gaze under a tired forehead. I followed the gaze.

It was Agata in a white dress, bare arms and bare back, rhythm from neck to feet. Again Agata and again the same: tense women and tense men; I pitied the woman, another one who could not trust Agata or her own husband.

Agata danced rock, she danced with Sewer, the resident playboy in our office; you stood at the door, blocking my view of her, with your back to me, you were looking at them, the back of your neck followed their movements. I could see her black head and her hips, it was just like the first time I saw her at a student dance. I was finishing the university, she was only starting, and when I first saw her, she was dancing. I thought I would never like her, her aggressive appearance and movement, the passion with which she entrusted herself to the arms of her partner, her overall way of inhabiting space—it all annoyed me. Even later, when we became close, I insisted that even when she said nothing, did nothing, even when she was sad, alone, in the company of an old lady or mine, or a dog—she was always provocative, “meaningful,” aggressive, and one couldn't stop being aware of her, forget that she existed, on the contrary, one had to follow her endlessly and note all her half turns and half gestures that were liquid, unnecessary, annoying. That's how she danced then, movement all over her body, maybe no, maybe

yes, Sewer turned her around his shoulder. You stood on the threshold, I saw half of your profile—and I saw the direction of your pupils.

“Borys!” called that woman, I now knew who she was: how many names can there be like yours? The smile abandoned her face, she didn’t catch it in time, it ran away beyond a place where she could call it back.

“Borys!” she called again, her voice sounded harsh, your back shivered, you turned towards the woman who stood stiff, unyielding, her hand traveling to her clavicle, the wedding ring shining on her finger. You approached Teresa, a patient expression on your face, your features dry and sensitive. Teresa said, “I want to go home,” you raised your eyebrows, you seemed tired and youthless, you said:

“If you want to.”

That’s how it was. I remember everything and I know that if something happened that evening, nothing happened in Agata. Maybe in me, yes: because that was the first time I saw the tragic, embarrassing mask of a jealous woman, Teresa’s face.

5

So how is it, listen: one wakes up in the morning on Monday, Friday; June or November; Paris, Warsaw, Grojec. One wakes up with the same nose one had when one fell asleep the night before, one looks through the same window from underneath the same pillow. The day began, it has swallowed you in its light, warmth, rain, streets, you think you live in it like in a house, in which everything is familiar. But you don’t know. The bells are not ringing. The sirens are not singing. There is no comet in the sky. And one day you will learn that it has started today.

In the evening you go to bed, you set your alarm. Jesus Mary, listen; a tragedy happened today, and you will learn about it later, a happiness that you did not call, you've been stamped, your destiny has been decided. And you are going to bed. Years later the memory of this day will throw you down on your knees. You will start dividing the past between "before" and "after." Give me a cigarette, Borys, today I will smoke, although even Agata didn't teach me to smoke addictively; I don't have passions. Or I should say, I didn't have them. The first passionate feeling that I discovered is the desire I have now: to go inside...

Oh, what I said about being stamped, about one's destiny being decided, doesn't mean I am a fatalist. I was never one; for a Catholic to talk about fate is like having in one's room, among many statues, a Mexican god of the sun, right? One is free, naturally, one constructs one's own destiny, that's what has been given to him. But does the word "free" mean anything until we fill it with another word, a specific context? "Freedom"—and that's it; such freedom doesn't exist, it has to be freedom "from" or "to" or "for." And, you see, we are not free from anything; never, anywhere. The ones who believe are not free from God, and so from all the rules and prohibitions, norms, a sense of sin, the awareness of responsibility, the concern about redemption. Those who do not believe in God are not free from—at least themselves; this is still a lot if they are thinking people. Ultimately our only freedom—terrifyingly large, sometimes more frightening than the most frightening slavery—is the freedom limited by the preposition "to."

We are free to choose. In a situation of choice we are allowed everything; in this context we choose our destiny; in this context we chose it even when we remain passive. But listen: when something approaches, when we encounter a new situation constructed

of entirely new choices, it turns out that not now, but yesterday or a year ago or ten years ago something happened or maybe we did something, or maybe something was done to us, something that carried in itself the embryo of today, this moment, in which we have to choose between the crucial matters. Before this choice he stands free and lonely, he himself irreplaceable by anyone or anything; one-person conference at the top. Looking down from this top, on one of the valleys, on one of the roads from his life, he will see that sign, the secretive seed, from which today grew. After this jubilee ball Agata, stamped and unaware of being stamped, was taken home by Sewer, he had a crush on her. I was angry about that. Sewer is married (he came without his wife then). “Will I do something to him?” she asked surprised. “You know that I hardly ever let people walk me home. But we live, as it turns out, in the same neighborhood, and it is three in the morning.”

Her egocentrism, perfect like a raincoat. In the taxi, of course, she turned him down, I found out the next day. She mastered that, but what agitated me was the awareness that “nothing happened” only because her lack of interest, not because of a principle. I was worried about her. After the story with Pawel I was full of anxiety, I was afraid she wouldn’t be able to remain on the surface. Her loneliness, her character, and the men always surrounding her—you know. You never believed her much, I know this from her diary. That day I was afraid about Sewer, she danced with him most. Well, I didn’t catch the sign either, for the next three years I was blind.

Blind and stupid. The next day we all arrived at work sleepy, heavy with tiredness, Sewer had a hangover. But none of you forgot about Agata’s existence. I answered many questions: yes, we’ve known each other for a long time, she is about to

finish university; her name is Agata, she doesn't have a fiancé. She lives alone ("oh shit!" Teodor woke up), her mother stayed in Gdynia. I wasn't hiding her (I had been working with you for half a year then), she was taking her exams, so she didn't have time, her mother was sick, so she went home a lot. Sewer said, "Great girl."

All this time you didn't say a word, you worked madly as usual, until suddenly you reached out for a cigarette and said ironically, "Oh, so Gdynia doesn't have a university. A daughter is out in the capital to have fun. Not enough freedom with mummy?"

I liked you more than the others, mainly because you were not ordinary and you did not smack your lips when a young pretty client visited our office. We were friends, a little, linked by professional ambition. I patiently listened to all the other comments, one can get used to everything. But you made me angry.

"Slow down in your judgments: she is a human being, not a cat; you wish you were as talented as she."

And I told you that Agata's début as a poet had been considered interesting.

How could I have known that in this way I walked into a role given to me by the day that passed yesterday? This is how act one began; less than twenty hours ago the curtains were raised. "There are more poets than cobblers these days," you said. Then I turned my drawers upside down, on the bottom of one lay Agata's "Graal." "Graal and nothing but Graal," she pathetically wrote this dedication on the first page, her handwriting scattered and intense, the ink pressed so strongly that it caused a hole in the paper on the word "Agata." "You can keep this for a few days," I said to you.

I remember that I fought a double battle over her existence. Two weeks before I had gotten married, and that was the first time, after the wedding and the party, that I returned to work. But no one said a word about Joseph, about my new husband whom they had met for the first time at the party. I should get used to living my life in her shadow. But this is not always possible. It was this double irritation that made me throw her book of poems on your desk. Even I fought against my own hostility to her existence.

Her poems, by the way, I never translated into my own language. Not that they were difficult, you know. What constituted their surface could be read without much effort, it seemed, without the careful cooperation of a reader. But somewhere in a word, accidentally touched, you found a secret doorknob, a button hidden in grapevines: a door opened. I did not want to go through. The place where I was being led contained everything I was against, everything I was not used to. I always wanted peace and order: there one touched on hope so big that it could only derive from suffering. And Agata's terrible stubbornness. Resistance against certainties. Graal and nothing but Graal; give me a cigarette.

I was so blind and deaf that I forgot about this incident. I had my own house, my own life. Agata traveled to visit her mother for two weeks, she was due back in July for an exam, in the chair where you are sitting Joseph sat reading a newspaper; I baked a Sunday cake. We walked into our marriage as into comfortable slippers. I could never do several things at once. Work and home were enough.

And yet, a few days later you asked without raising your head which Warsaw gypsy environment Agata was connected to. "None," I answered, also casually, I was busy with a client, and also, a conversation that had barely begun had no reason to be

continued. And a few days later you heard her program on the radio. “About love, I assume?” I asked. You nodded. “My wife didn’t like it.”

Teresa, I remembered her face. I can perfectly imagine her sitting next to the radio, passion in her heart on hearing Agata’s voice, even though it wasn’t her voice. “The author,” you said in an indifferent tone, “took the side of the mistress.”

I smiled.

“Yes, of course, one of Agata’s obsessions. She always says that in life and literature, as a result of law and duty, the betrayed spouse has a monopoly on respect and compassion. She threatens to write an epic about illicit love one day. And that will be pure love, she announces.”

“Teresa says that the direction of this woman’s sympathy will change as soon as she becomes a wife.” That’s what you said: Teresa says. Throughout the entire conversation your voice was absent.

“Agata doesn’t want to be anybody’s wife. No one believes it, but it is true.”

“It’s impossible, unwise.”

“I also think it unwise. But possible.”

Joseph called, I asked him to buy bread, we had a conference that day. When I was on the phone, you laid Agata’s book of poems on my desk. Then Teresa came in.

Joseph was also busy that afternoon, we hadn’t decided who would buy the bread, the conversation extended, you thanked your wife for some message. “Graal” blue black lay on the edges of our desks. Teresa picked it up. Her pale skin gave away her fatigue. And yet she must have been good looking, not that long ago. How many years had she

been sick for then? Six? That means you had been married for about ten, supposedly she got sick after the twins. But her marriage seemed older than yours.

I put the receiver back, we shook hands, “my wife,” you said. In the shake of her hand I felt resentment. I didn’t yet know why.

“So it is your friend who is that promising poet,” Teresa smiled with the book in her hand. Both words were well composed, the adjective “promising” was given a slight pressure, between the latter and the quite unserious sounding “poet” there was an ambiguous space longer than *tire* and shorter than pause. I felt pity and some sort of loyalty. We were on the same side of the barricade, but Joseph feared Agata as he feared cats. And I was not material for Medea.

“We were just talking about her with your husband,” I said.

“For three evenings he couldn’t put it down,” Teresa shook “Gaal.” I recognized her smile from the party. “I could not get him to turn off the lamp.”

I can imagine it: the lamp next to the desk, Teresa in bed staring at your back, the twins in the other room, your mother says “goodnight” from the kitchen. But the night is not good, Teresa already knows the book of poems, the aggressiveness of the poem “Calling For Love.” “I will throw away your stone, make you eternal rose.” “Go to sleep,” says Teresa like all the wives in the world. “You will have enough time to learn this by heart when I go to the sanatorium.” Your back is not moving, the rustle of pages is hardly audible; you read each poem carefully and several times; and when you read, here and there your boat reveals broken boards. “In us is our savior from ourselves.”

“Set the alarm,” says Teresa, your wife. Every evening you set the alarm. Like Joseph, like all husbands in the world. You set the alarm. But you return to the desk. “Eternal rose.” You touch Teresa’s silent hostility with your back.

6

The book of poems lay on your desk for three days; you returned it to me after six or seven. It was also the sixth or seventh day from the time when Agata’s fate became decided. But neither you nor Agata knew about it.

In the meantime she sat in Gdynia, supposedly studying for exams, but that June was the hottest month of the summer, and I received her photo by mail, signed, “I am alive, distilled water. With kisses, Agata.” Here, look: here is Agata on the beach, illuminated by the sun, confident, uninfected by the knowledge of the journey towards her that you’d already begun; of her own journey to the hour, in which everything will be done and familiar, Agata promising eternal rose.

The young man behind her is one of her sea victories—he later came here many times, he called and tried to talk to her; she was terribly bored with him eventually. The lady next to her is her mother; did you know her? That’s a pity.

One must have known her, Agata’s mother, in order to see Agata more clearly: I had known her for three years when I saw her home and her in its background—my imaginary drawing of Agata transformed into a full portrait.

Agata didn’t inherit her mother’s charming gentleness and quietness, nor her ease of moving into the shade, nor her delicate shyness and the stylish joy that originates from a smart distance and from an internal order. Mrs. Sophia, her way of being, brought sincerity to those who knew her, it was always warm around her, do you understand? The

temperature around Agata was always too high, she seemed ready to jump at any time, to stand for or against something; charmed, shocked, touched to the bottom of her heart, she was bored only with the “warm” state of things. But this would happen to her very rarely, because she was able to fit so many activities, observations, internal adventures in a short time that there was not much time for the deadly boredom. Anything could take her on an emotional journey, this never ceased to amaze me.

She could, all the same, imagine some unspeakable torture, you know that best. A suddenly spoken word or an unspoken thought, some image, received impression—shattered her like a stone from a spreading abyss. She would start suffering obsessively from a vision of you sick, yet inaccessible to her, distanced by the existence of Teresa leaning towards your body in bed, Teresa full of power and the right to serve you. One day she imagined you would die before she does; she said it to me, and then she was quiet. I was putting Marc to sleep, and I didn’t even react to her words and to the silence that followed them. When I looked at her, she was sitting on a chair, her whitened fingers holding on to the handrail, her eyelids heavily shutting her eyes.

“Agata, don’t be stupid!”

But she didn’t open her eyes, so I caressed her face.

Later, when she regained control over herself, we spoke of a hundred unimportant things. And yet, all was wrong, the contact had been broken, as if something had frozen inside her, tea was getting cold on a table beside her, she began to dress. She stood facing the mirror, applying lipstick, she threw the lipstick away, and leaned against the wall.

“Sabina. I would rather die alone. But he cannot die before me. Beyond me. No one can want this from me, Sabina. Not this.

“Oh God, Agata, Borys is nowhere near death!” I screamed.

She looked at me, astonished.

“How you don’t understand anything, Sabina. How you don’t know anything.”

“You are a hysteric.”

“Sabina, I love,” she said.

“You are torturing yourself instead of loving. Take bromide and go to sleep. Besides we are all in danger of this, of what you are in danger of.”

She walked towards the door, opened it, walked out; she turned in the corridor, the light from the lantern in the stairs whitened her face like a mask.

“You don’t know. You think that I talk about that... that I could not live without him. But no. You don’t know what it means: to have no right to his life, and no right to his death. You see, I already know one of those.”

And she left. Only then did I realize. It was a few months after her mother’s death; you couldn’t have gone to the funeral, because you couldn’t have explained it to Teresa. And I imagined what she must have thought of: the law and the lawlessness, and death that does not make those equal. I ran down the stairs, I tripped on the mat under the first floor door, outside I was blinded by the rain, I yelled, “Agata!” She turned around, we began to run towards each other. We hugged with wet hands, I said that if death it is, then nothing else matters, the pain is the same with a wedding ring on a finger or without it, and I couldn’t tell whether it was rain or tears washing her face.

“The jar” she said. “The jar with honey. He liked honey, you know. And I don’t. And this open jar of honey remains at my apartment. It is sitting on the table, and it is the only sign of Borys’ existence. At the cemetery, I wouldn’t be allowed to cry next to his wife. I would walk to this jar as to the real coffin.

“Darling, his sign is love. It doesn’t matter where the tears fall. Agata.”

“I thought that. Before.”

“Before what?”

“Before my mother died.”

I could have spared us both this memory. It would have been an almost meaningless detail. Here, read it: in the meantime I’ll make tea. I found this story in her papers.

7

SUNDAY

“Go now, go,” she said and smiled.

Before you go away, you will turn around and wave, and my mother will immediately begin to die again, listen; she is dying again whenever I am alone. When I found the letter, I put it on the table, we looked at each other. Then I got dressed and went to Grand. I was right, Michael sat in a small bar, leaning on his elbows. The letter was lying in my room, Michael rushed out of the chair, he gave me his uncomfortable stool.

We drank cognac, Violetta-the-barmaid, strong and stalwart, remained me of a lioness. I see her in the bus in the morning, she is sometimes accompanied by a young boy; here he is, he came when we were drinking the cognac. Violetta-the-barmaid said, “hallou,” the boy murmured, “hallo, mama,” he picked up a book from her and left. I

raised the glass to my lips. Michael flicked a lighter at the tip of my cigarette, I looked at the barmaid carefully and sarcastically quipped, “She is older than my mother.” Michael, who had been to the funeral, looked at me, he said, don’t drink anymore.

“Go,” she said.

Saturday paranoia overtook the streets, the tram stops were full, people jumped into the street, one in front of the other, in search of an unattainable taxi. The evening was grayish, the air purple and pre-summer, Sunday, predicted every six days, arrived—as always—in a city that was not prepared for it, the city that immediately turned into spasms of unrecognizable hope.

At night I took a sleeping pill and fell asleep leaning over her with a tiny piece of wood wrapped in a wet wood-wool; I fell asleep wetting my mother’s small, kind lips with this wooden piece; my mother’s lips, small and pink, as if she was not dying, kept on repeating stubbornly and rhythmically the little word “mother,” but I feel asleep and I didn’t see the moment when she stopped this whispering cry, and, silencing herself and me—with the pink lips she asked quietly, clearly and as precisely: “Why.”

“Go,” she said and smiled, he liked her smile.

You must leave me, you must rush to the train; and where am I supposed to go, where can I escape from her dying, let her die without me, I have already seen it, I know it all, from the beginning to the end. Again she will say her mother, head on the pillow will turn left and right, left and right like mine while making love, I will knock off the table an Easter egg with a hole in the opening of the shell. This Easter Egg I brought her from Warsaw a week earlier. I walked into the isolation ward holding it in my hand, and

my mother called, “Ah!” I will then knock it from the table, the colorful shell will shatter gently, I will not stand her indifference, terrified I will murmur, “Mommy.”

But now there will be no cancellation, no rescue, she has to die absolutely perfectly, more than before, when she was really dying, because then a miracle could have happened, or at least one could have prayed for it and think that suddenly she will cease her dying, if only I murmur: mommy.

Now nothing of this kind can happen, and it didn’t happen then; until the end of my life she will be calling her egoistic and unreasonable mother, Mother, as if her own mother were still alive, as if it wasn’t me who counted most in her life, or my father, her husband. Nothing will happen and again I will think that I will say the same words when I am dying, I will call my mother from her grave, as if she could do something about my dying, just as she fed me when I was hungry.

“If you miss the train...” she said and smiled, he liked her smile.

You have your train, I have the letter on the table. Everyone gets what they deserve. I won’t be able to do anything so that she dies faster; today yes, but not tomorrow: tomorrow is Sunday.

Tomorrow is Sunday; on Sundays one cannot push or trick the time, the Sunday time, the stretchy like a gum time of Marcel Proust. On Sundays one is not an elder bookkeeper or a cobbler, one does not have a sanctuary at one’s desk or behind the register, nothing that was added to us. On Sunday one watches in the mirror one’s own little soul, uncovered, one’s own small private life. Here’s your clean shirt, says the wife and she puts on her best shoes, even though it is raining; dinner will consist of three

dishes, and mommy, daddy, will we go to the circus, and if you want, my dear, I will buy tickets to the cinema, says the husband. And that's how Sundays passes.

Sunday is for the old and for the tired, Sunday is for marriages, Sunday is for those happily in love. The lonely have themselves to blame, and Sunday is a punishment for the guilty ones. In this long day there is as much room for love, for rest, for joy, as for suffering, for celebrating suffering. I never loved you more than on a Sunday. Only on Sunday can I hate you so much. You took the last resort away from me: the desire to pick up the receiver.

"Go now," she said. "Run." She put her hand on his shoulder, their smiles met in the wind and in the cold. A redheaded older lady gazed with hostility at this meeting of smiles and faces turned towards one another. "Go," she said.

And she said,

"Until Monday."

By Monday, I will have sent my mother to the other world, in my memory I will repeat every gesture of her head, left and right, left and right; and the small five minutes during which I have to gather and fold in this blue bathrobe of hers all those funny things: the morning slippers, unwrapped candy, my letters laid out in the drawer, a pencil, a purse, a mirror and a lipstick; I will wheeze "mommy," and she will not respond. In the hallway the eavesdropping patient will ask shyly: is it yet? "Yes," I will respond.

"Until Monday," she said holding the smile on her face, and he touched the collar of her coat with his hand, the older lady shrugged her shoulders.

"Wait," he said. "Wait."

And he said,

“I will come tomorrow.”

I must have misheard you, or maybe I dreamt it or maybe you confused the days. You make mistakes only in little things, you forget only the trivial, but things little and trivial sometimes stop being trivial and small.

“Tomorrow?” she asked.

I don’t ask you why you decide about our meetings. Your telegrams and telephones always say: “I am arriving today.” I throw away my theatre ticket, or my aunt arrived, I tell my friends, I say, unfortunately, I have to take care of a very important matter, I am sorry, I say.

I don’t ask why you never come on a Sunday either. Every six days I walk into it as into the cage of a lion who bares its teeth. The animal on one end, I on the other, listen: if I didn’t ask you to be with me on this Sunday, the only Sunday, it was because you could have refused. You could have refused gently and with sadness, and in your voice I would have discovered a hint of surprise, which you would have wished to hide, because one human being has to fix another human being’s tactlessness with tact. You would have said no then, and I would have said, “it’s nothing, it’s nothing,” and something would have happened that could never be taken back, a small, little, trivial thing that could not be fixed, because I would have then thought that I don’t know what love is for if not to hold each other’s hands in the darkness full of fear.

“Tomorrow?” she asked in a small, quiet voice. “Tomorrow?” And she added dryly, “Tomorrow is Sunday.”

“Tomorrow is Sunday,” she said again with hope in her voice, with uncertainty; the lion hid his teeth behind his foaming mouth.

“I know,” she said with triumph. She saw him between the eyebrows: he knew nothing of his miracle-making, unaware of any of this he led the lion, now fawning as a dog, he led the lion to her hands.

“I know,” he said. “This is a gift for you. And for me,” he said. “Wait for me from five o’clock on.”

And he said, “I won’t leave until the night.”

The box of a bus appeared far in the perspective of the alley; the line expanded hopelessly, everyone looked at each other with growing hostility. Her hair landed on his breasts, she grabbed his sleeve, he put his fingers on her face. Get some rest, he said wait for me, she turned on the platform, they cannot separate, said a mean voice, she raised her arm, he raised his arm. He walked along the pathway, please move forward, called the conductor, and another street already swam in the window.

Just the very fact that you will come on Sunday makes my mother die a little less. Tomorrow I will hold your hand, finally resembling a woman who has next to her someone for silence and for tears, I will be like an average woman who, at the mother’s or father’s grave, stands supported by a man full of fear about her pain and fear, and already because of that less in pain and less in the darkness.

As I was walking away from the fresh grave, from the heap of bows and flowers, you approached me for a minute, you came out of the strangers, I said thank you to you as I did to the others. I didn’t even know you were there, I didn’t let you know; who did you find out from? None of my family nor my friends knew you; they stood together, opposite. I saw their faces, I had time to count them like pieces of gold after a financial disaster. They came, they traveled from far away, from where I also came to participate

in the three day long play of her death. It was for me they stood there, tired and cold: only one woman-friend, men with whom I worked and dreamt, including one who was with me before you, and another whom many believe to be sleeping with me. But they couldn't walk me through the darkness. Beyond the cemetery wall the speaker sang Marina- Marina. I stood there stripped of unconditional love, love for nothing and because when I was a little girl I called water "vater" It was that very love that was being buried, and that little girl; the wet ground fell on the pupil with pig tales crying into the motherly apron over her first love; in the right time the earth will receive all the other metamorphoses of the pupil—also the one known only to you.

You walked out of the crowd of strangers to shake my hand, I said thank you, you returned into the crowd of strangers. From your palm I took nothing that could not be forgotten, and I will forget this tomorrow, all the sins will be forgiven.

"Are you getting off?" she asked, the fat man put his stomach on the back of the bench, through this small opening she found her way to the exit, the fat man surrounded her with his swollen eyes, he quietly clicked his tongue.

"Gong" was full as always, suddenly all of Warsaw started drinking tea. But from above the bar a friendly hand reached out to her, Christopher jumped off his stool, Jan ran to the coatroom with her coat.

They were happy that she came, she was smiling to her, they liked her smile, but what about your baggy eyes? asked Jan, she must have had a big night last night , added Christopher, you hang out with psychos, Jan said. She laughed.

"Christopher, have you written anything new?" she asked and Christopher lit up from inside as if his face were Aladdin's lamp. The day before he had finished a big piece

of poetic prose, I will send it to “Creativity,” he said shyly and tenderly, Jan, immediately severe, demanded: read.

To be a poet like Christopher, to be a critic like Jan, to carry inside such an Aladdin’s lamp, independent of people and of days of the week. Good days go by, people die and stop loving: my lamp, lit and shut down beyond me, has nothing to do with Aladdin.

“I left it at home,” said Christopher quietly and tenderly; there will be no green flowers or swallows flying out of hair, there will be no immersion in his nostalgia of love, far away from the room where the letter is waiting silently and patiently. This letter may start everything all over again: “... write more often, my darling...” I will collect all her little things in a blue robe, they will allow me into the funeral home—no, not about funeral home—

“Tomorrow” she said. “Tomorrow, Christopher. Jan, we can come to his place, do you want to, I’m busy in the afternoon, but we can come to him, to you, before noon, at eleven, at noon, whenever you want, I have to be home at five, I will bring a bottle of wine,” she said, she gazed at them brightly and warmly, warmly and brightly, she put both her hands on Christopher’s hands.

“Thank you,” she said to the waitress, the tea was steaming; Jan shook his head: in the morning I am working on an outline of my article, you know, the cycle about the goal of criticism, the rest of Sunday I promised to Basia. O, said Jan with regret, I have to work tomorrow, I will finish “Anhoe,” she is like you, he said; did you already put sugar in?

To be a poet like Christopher, to be Jan's Basia, to have a real Aladdin's lamp; but it's not so bad, at five I will be able to cry with easy tears, the ones that come only when one cries next to someone; I will be loved, I will love, I will be like Christopher's Anhoe. When the doorbell rings at five, I will even be able to take the letter off the table and put it away in the closet, under the suitcases, under the blankets, under the pile of books.

She said lightly, with her lips on the edge of the glass, "Monday then." And she said, "What a beautiful day it is, Monday."

"Are you crazy?" Jan asked in a matter of fact way, Christopher was silent far away, Anhoe; she answered, "Because Sunday is the worst."

"Why?" Jan asked; Sunday is good, he said, even Saturday is different, you can sleep in late... I can finish up my article, I can have a lot of time with Basia, he said.

"Yes," she said and smiled. "Sunday is good. For artists. Or for the old and the tired, or for marriages. And it is damn good for those happily in love."

"Are you by any chance unhappily in love?" Jan asked ironically. "I don't believe it. Did you have a fight?" he asked and brushed off the dust from his sweater, she said,

"Now I'm buying wine for everyone."

They walked her to the bus; the wind blew the hysterical streets of the Saturday city, the early April night drizzled clear coolness. "You look great in black," said Christopher and he blushed. Jan raised his eyebrows, he gazed at her arm. "I'm sorry," Christopher said shyly. "My Anhoe always wears black too."

“It’s winter, you know,” he said and he lit from inside, “it’s winter, and she stands in the snow all black, and her face is black too, only her eyes are green, you know,” he said and explained, “like you.”

“You won’t fool her with Anhoe,” Jan stated, she smiled, each step brought her closer to the table on which the letter lay.

Was it a table there, in the cold room, gray walls; it was, after all, a table, very low; they told me to go there, but the door was closed, it was snowing, I stood there in all black, in my hands I held her black dress and white coral beads, which I had bought her a week before—it was snowing even though it was nearly Easter. I stood there, and then someone opened the door from inside, I saw a table facing me, and what was laying on it; please, said the stranger, who leaned over it, I saw what he was doing. The table was facing me, and I said frowning, to the wall, my face to the gray wall, I leaned my face on the wall, I screamed, “no.”

“You should get some sleep, you should get a lot of sleep tonight,” said Christopher and together with Jan he helped her climb the steep bus step. “Okay,” she said, “that’s what I will do, bye-bye,” they waved to her, kiosk Ruch covered them, the conductor said in a tired voice, “please.”

“Please,” said the stranger in a tired voice, and I screamed “no” with my face leaning on the wall, he turned his featureless face towards me, I pushed myself from the wall, I said, “Don’t touch her. Please leave.”

“As you wish,” he said. “But I get paid for this.”

“Yes,” I said. “Exactly. Please leave.”

The bus stopped, it rocked a little, people unconsciously headed towards the exit, at any price, as if a mortal danger awaited them in the bus. She stood by the kiosk, she watched a funny dirty mutt on the street, it was getting cloudy, an older couple with roses wrapped in foil hailed a taxi nr 287. There was nothing to do on the street.

“Bitch,” said a man at the gate.

She was closing the door behind her when the telephone rang. There was static in the receiver, the keys fell out of her hands, she said, hallo, a dry female voice announced,

“Someone from Skierniewice will be speaking.”

“Hallo,” she said, the letter lay on the table; why is he calling now, why is he calling; but maybe she knew a little or maybe she knew it all, before his voice swam from in between the noise, his voice, distant, nice, his worried voice.

“Hallo,” he said. “My love.”

“Yes.”

“I won’t be able to come over tomorrow,” he said.

He said, “Hallo. Hallo.”

“Hallo,” she said.

“My love, I won’t be able to see you tomorrow.”

“Yes.”

“I’m very sorry, listen. My wife is not feeling too well. My love.”

“I understand.”

“Hallo, my love.”

“Hallo.”

“I will call you on Monday,” said the man whom she loved, who will not be present at her death, whose death she will not be able to accompany.

8

But all this took place much later. The photo from the beach comes from the days when the jar of honey was not yet on Agata’s table. In the Sopot’s Grand she danced, her arms dressed in brown tan, women looking at her and raising their eyebrows; she always wore her skin like a luxurious dress. The stars ascended above them like sparks when they stood on the pier sharply stuck in the black and aromatic sea, surrounded by the thick lamps. The nights closed Agata’s lips. Dreyer whispered, “You are like a shell,” she said, “Be quiet.” She would say later that Dreyer “was nice,” and that they kissed once on the pier under a pillar on the sand, at night. It was beautiful and awfully sad, because that was it and nothing more, Agata said. “No more Dreyer,” she said. I asked, “And him?” but I didn’t make her feel guilty. “I realized I would not love him,” she said. “So what else could I do?”

She studied before noon; in the fainting heat that began in the mornings the tram carried Mrs. Sophia, Wolga and her to the street which led to the beach. The painters and Dreyer, all sleepy, positioned themselves near by, Dreyer took out a book, the same one every day; Stepien and Bart put out their needless easels with a dry bang; Mrs. Sophia, sitting under a pine tree on a sand-drift, gazed at her daughter seriously studying her class notes and lectures. Wolga hung her tongue out of her muzzle like a rose petal. The wind covered the papers with freckles of sand, spreading it around the beach, the sounding sea smartly ran towards it. Every half an hour—spent by the three men in hostile silence—Agata gave a signal to go into the water; Wolga ran in front of them in mists of sand. It

seemed that no one did anything, but three weeks later Agata returned to Warsaw, passed her exams with excellence, and received her Master's degree.

Wait, what was she like then, as yet undisturbed by you? It seemed that she could have anything, without an effort even; everyone thought that, and she thought that too. But perhaps this is not a precise way to put it, because she didn't wait for a gift, she waited rather, until she would be overtaken by desire—it's hard to find another word for those obsessive wishes, wishes for anything: to watch a movie, to talk to someone, to walk, sleep, dance, flirt; and it was the same when it came to helping someone, or doing work. It was hard to believe how much energy she set in motion to satisfy one of those wishes—and how happy she could be when her goal was achieved. Everything was worth taking the effort, but she eventually had to receive everything, or maybe rather take it herself.

On the other hand, when something didn't work out the way she wished, she suffered tortures. Will you believe that when she didn't receive movie tickets, she turned pale out of passion and sorrow, nothing could replace the movie today, now, immediately, it seemed as if she had dreamt of this movie for years, as if it was impossible to wait until tomorrow. In her desires "tomorrow" didn't exist. Waiting, patience—she had nothing in common with those. Have a cigarette, it's not easy for you to listen to this. But *chapeau-bas*: you were an excellent teacher.

But no, wait: this is not Agata, not yet. She wanted to have, she constantly wanted to have, egoistically she wanted to own, but you know that the world of her desires was not a material one: she never suffered due to lack of money, for example, and she hardly ever had it. Girls like her want to ride in cars, they want nylon furs, dresses, high-heels

from komis; in Bristol they drink Martel and champagne, they look out from the Volkswagens, they slid down in Powsina from an Italian scooter; in the summer you see them in a resort on the balcony in the coffee places, in the winter at Jedrus in Zakopane. They are accompanied by a balding old man or a blasé film director, or a cynical Apollo, if they both have money. Once at a hairdresser's I sat next to two such girls; in a matter-of-fact tone, like in a doctor's waiting room one talks of one's and another's' diseases, they counted aloud their tergal skirts and Italian high-heels; Helena Rubinstein lipsticks, fur hats as large as fluffy buckets. "Yours went on a spree," said one in regard to the wonderful sweater of her friend. "Can you imagine?" said the winner of the competition. "And now we're going skiing. But yours is quite generous too," she admitted mercifully.

With that Agata had nothing in common. Nothing with the means needed for the sweaters and Helena Rubinstein cosmetics, means in the form of young or old, but always rich men. She had nothing in common with the capriciousness of this category, desiring things that one can touch, eat, put on. When she had money, she spent it without a plan on unnecessary objects, on anything; but when she didn't have money, it didn't become the object of her dreams; Do you know what she did with the money for her book? She bought all those books and record players, we drank vodka at her place endlessly, she gave me a pair of dressy shoes, and treated herself to an old fashioned silver bracelet. I was angry with her, but she would not even give excuses.

Give excuses! As if she could be forced to do that. For she was always right. And the first say. When she said, "Let's go for a walk, for coffee, for a movie," it was impossible not to have time, it was known that a refusal to her would be an undeserved punishment—and in fact she was hardly ever refused anything. She could be friends with

people who considered her decisions to be their own. She was adored, it's true, but she also adored her friends; until you appeared, it was friends to whom she gave her time, her joys—but not sadness, that she carried on her own. No one could tell stories like her, no one else could transform an insignificant detail into the funniest, the most interesting adventure. The hundreds of different affairs she arrived with immediately became everyone's affairs, we all had something to think about and something to enjoy. When she was in a good mood, the company sparkled like champagne, when she came in a gloomy mood, we all had endless discussions and arguments, and everyone felt engaged in them to the bone. Without Agata our group fell apart; we lacked pepper, mercury, a gust of wind.

It was indeed the very extract of egocentrism—egocentrism based on realistic, valid grounds. And she knew about all this, Borys. Even her faults, her mistakes gave rise to kindness and an all-accepting smile. God only knows why this whole atmosphere which grew around her didn't overtake her, didn't turn her into an empty conceited doll.

“Maybe I am smart,” she smiled when I thought of this aloud once. “Could you not consider this possibility?”

“I'm serious, Agata. God only knows...”

“You omit the business route. Shouldn't you first turn to me for information?”

“You are being ironic, and I am seriously thinking about this. They adore you, and you don't get stupefied.”

“Because I am smart,” she said entirely seriously. “Smart inside. That's first of all. And second of all, it seems to me Sabina that you don't know what friendship is about.”

I bridled.

“What does friendship have to do with it!”

“A lot. Because I like them. Very much. And they want me to be like this. Do you think it’s always easy?”

So I don’t know, maybe in front of them she also played her role, whether she wanted to or not—as she performed in front of me for three years, when she was with you.

You could count on her in everything; also that she will leave if you tell her to. Didn't she ask every once in a while, dying out of fear, of guilt over your nervous tiredness, over your wan, more and more ill-looking face, over your fate crucified between an obligation and a lie; didn't she ask, "tell me, should I go away?" One time, with the biggest effort, fighting with embarrassment and fear because of the issue she was touching on, she reminded you that you remained a Catholic. "You are a Catholic," she said, "I may not understand it," she said, "but I have to accept it." And she said that she even understood. You shut, slammed her lips, and you, who didn't have the courage to say "I love you" as simply as she did, at those times you tore the confession out of yourself, from the depths of your silent resistance. I love you, stop it, you would say, you shook her body filled with despair, you hugged her in fear of her leaving and in fear of her words with which she told you the truth about yourself; with your lips hid in her breasts you would say unclearly, but for her it was like a cane in the blind's hand.

"I know, I know. I cannot explain. I cannot talk about this. But without you I would stop... stop... Agata, to carry all this and not have you. No."

She took this from you, she packed those words unclear and yet definite. Inside them was an indestructible faith in their sincerity and an equally indestructible certainty that if you indeed had to stand in front of a choice: Teresa or Agata—you would choose Teresa. Those contradictions that could not be compromised lived inside her in full compromise and intimacy even. Not that long ago, maybe a year or so, I tried to demonstrate her how hostile those two are in relation to one another, how much they hate

one another. They were like plus and minus, “this is a plus and this is a minus,” I said. “One or the other,” I said; “together your two certainties form chaos.”

She answered not to mix mathematics with life; and with faith either, she smiled. We sat in the park: the next day I was going away on vacation, and she was staying in town. But this time not with you, even though you were also staying. Teresa was feeling so well that she didn’t want to go to the health resort, for the first time in many years she didn’t want to go anywhere until your vacation began. This year’s summer was not meant to be what the two of you looked forward to all year, she told me this half an hour before and I was afraid to look at her, but my fear was not necessary, her face looked bright and hard, only her eyes were escaping sideways, persistently she avoided my gaze; (...)

Two men passed by our bench, an old one, bold, with a greasy face; the other one small, wearing a sweater without a shirt underneath, maybe a son of the first. Two generations melted their eyes in the place next to me filled with Agata. I didn’t even exist to them for a moment.

“That,” she said, her eyes pointed at the back of the two men, her voice was calm, “that I will still have for many years. But I have to become the slaughtered bullock one day anyway, you know.”

She added incomprehensibly, “Everyone carries a seed, everyone. Like a fruit. The birds fly over, one emptiness comes after another. A bug. Whatever is decay rots. It falls off. But the seed must be saved. The seed must remain untouched. It is from the seed that...”

Unclearly moved I asked what the seed was.

“It is what we never cease to believe. What is underneath us; despite all. Despite the evil inside us, despite our weaknesses, despite all the gold we had taken. I steal, I lie, I commit adultery—but I will not kill; a thousand compromises, and then no compromise one day; no matter for what price, never. Do you understand?”

Did she tell you about this seed, Borys? I said then that yes, yes: the seed, I understand, my hands were shaking. She added that you could misunderstand your seed. But if the “owner of the seed” doesn’t know about it, if he or she believes that it is the only true seed, then it is okay, she said.

“It will save you anyway,” she said, she threw away her cigarette, she rose, all straight, shining in the June afternoon.

“From what? Save—from what? I asked from below, I thought about myself and Joseph, about you, about her. About Teresa. Our seeds. Someone passed us by, I saw his back, a colorful shirt, I thought about him too.

“Don’t ask me to be the priest, me,” she said and laughed. “Think about your own seed, it will answer you. The seeds are very individual, me dear. Maybe each one saves from something else. Come, I have to go back home.”

“But,” I said, “listen. You talk about me, you talk about... But you. What is your seed. If you can. If you are able to. If you know?”

“I know,” she said. “Love.”

I stepped out of our office; when I came back, Teresa stood next to your desk, I recognized her legs and her fur above them, I instinctively backed away; I stood in the corridor when she left the office shaking, she walked by me without having recognized me. You sat at your desk immobile, the pile of correspondence accumulated in front of you. I said that Agata had gone away to Gdynia. You raised your head, you didn't even pretend indifference, it surprised me.

“Did something happen?”

I told you what had happened, or rather that nothing had happened, because her dog was dying, and one cannot call that a misfortune, and something in your face straightened up, your tense gaze relaxed, nothing happened, it is only the dog... and you said, and I felt embarrassed that you didn't control yourself, you said, as if asking a question, that she would probably stay there a day or two; and I saw that you wanted me to contradict you.

“She called when she was leaving; she said she is coming back right away. I think she is already on the train. She wanted to put it to sleep, that dog.”

You left the office before the end of the business day, you suddenly disappeared, you found yourself under her still sleeping door, and again you sat on the highest step, but now you leaned your back on the handrail and below you various hands swam towards upstairs or towards downstairs, the keys in the locks clashed, childish steps flew up and down: the elevator was broken. I thought it was nothing, this dog, but I telephoned my house, Joseph was heading to a conference in his office; give me Mrs. Celina on the phone, and Celina agreed to stay with Mark, and the Orbis information told me the time

of the Gdynia train arrival. The train was arriving in the very middle of an April afternoon, a few minutes after two o'clock, and I walked several tram stops through the city that stretched lazily and spring-like, and then I went to the train station and just then a river of people poured out, a river separated by streams of exiting people. From one of those streams Agata appeared; green bag in hand, small face above the collar of the unbuttoned coat. Her eyes didn't look for anyone in the crowd, here we are, there you are, hallo, the crowd screamed, and I walked closely to her, but she didn't see me, wanted to pass me by, she struggled through the screams and hugs; Agata, what's with you, I said, don't you recognize me? And then she threw the bag on the ground and entangled my neck with her hands.

“Especially for me? For me?! For me?! You didn't go home?” I said that I thought it would be nice, and she said she would remember this, and her eyes were shining feverishly.

“I will remember this,” she said and I realized that I had never, ever come to welcome her at a train station, while she, if she were around and if she knew when I was returning, always welcomed me, even when Joseph and I returned from somewhere together; if she knew when I was returning. So I didn't say anything, I just took the bag from her hand, despite her protests, and I asked, “Wolga?”

“She is dead. Listen, let's catch a taxi, come over to my place, for a moment, for half an hour; I will take a shower, and you will make some coffee. My friend.”

“But...,” I said. “Today...”

“He won’t come before 5,” she implored. “Come with me. Mark is with Celina?” She knew well that I never go out when Joseph is home; and there was a special beginning tone in her voice, so I agreed.

In the taxi we said nothing about Wolga; she opened the window, the cold wind blew through our hair, and she said that here the spring had walked farther than there.

“There, you can see the bushes extend and grow, you know,” she said. “And around the trees, around the branches there is fog if one watches them from afar. And it is so unbearably hot in the train.”

We got out of the taxi; the wind walked on the street, Agata deeply inhaled the air. “I will try to think only about vacation,” she said. “To have such a vacation ahead, is that not a lot?” And we walked into the hallway of her building; the automatic door followed us.

“The elevator is broken, of course,” she said, she took me over on the steps, she grabbed the bag from my hands; we walked holding on to the handrail, she was still saying something, someone passed by, someone else walked out of the flat opposite, you have a hole in your stocking, I said; God, I’m broke, yelled Agata, first looking at one, then at the other leg. “I expected it,” I said. “It’s already the ninth day of the month, how could you have money?” “Don’t annoy me,” she said without anger, we turned into the top floor. She still walked ahead of me, and when she reached the half-level, under the door of Rose, your maid’s sister-in-law, the door opened slightly, then shut again, leaving a narrow space in between, Agata was carrying her foot onto the next step when she suddenly stopped; I saw her profile, I didn’t reach the half-level yet, I was still walking opposite way to her, and I saw how her face shivered; how something flew through half

of her face that changed it, the bag fell lightly on the steps, and she stood there and looked ahead, slightly higher. I saw her immobile eye with half of its iris and the shiny white; I twitched my head, I turned it in the same direction.

76

You sat there, on the highest level, your back leaning against the round handrail; there was an open matchbox and a high pile of used matches and ash; you began getting up slowly and you drew back your leg, the jostled box fell from the step, some of its contents formed an ugly mess.

“Borys. Borys?” she said, she walked up to you and suddenly I began learning those fag-ends by heart, this smoke around and this waiting on the stairs, and her rushing foot crushed the box, craah. She didn’t even look, and this I have also learned, and a terrible longing entered my throat, it filled my lips, craah, you are waiting, she said, as if she was thanking you for a throne or a gray-squirrel fur, I swallowed my saliva, I heard from within me Joseph’s “because of this occasion, because of this occasion” from the night before, from my love night, I stopped the scream tearing my mouth apart with my teeth, and then she turned to me abruptly, she only then remembered me, and I saw her face full of fear.

That’s why I then said what I said, if you remember, if you heard anything at all; because an animal caught in a cage looked at me and I understood that my presence there was the cage, the rattling of paws. It was her fault, that I stood there, a witness to your disloyalty, a punishment for the weakness that she didn’t want to be alone for those few hours before your visit; and now someone besides the two of you managed to get behind the curtains. She must have had all your carefulness in memory when she looked at me

there, on the stairs, and maybe she saw again the scene from years before at the taxi stand, and all the other “someone may see us,” and that you never rode the tram together, or that you never went to the movies together, and she must have had in memory her own stepping on herself when she was trying to meet your expectations, and I thought that I understood; compassion sneaked into me, Borys. I began speaking, I curved my lips to a smile, the scream pressed on my teeth from inside and made my laughter sound louder, my laughter which rumbled in the hallway, and I made a few steps forward, higher, and I turned towards you.

“Maybe this is the first accident in your life, Borys, but in Agata’s life this is a regular procedure,” I said in the midst of my laughter. “If you had confessed that she was seducing you, I would have given you some advice.”

Agata looked more carefully, not as blindly as before, I could read nothing from you, but then again, you stood too far away for my shortsightedness. I stupidly pointed my index at you, as if in a teacher’s gesture:

“You are not the first one whom she stands off like this. She usually provokes and encourages to flirt, until the partner begins to sparkle. Then she agrees to a *rendez-vous*, the deer allows itself to be caught, and she brings a friend to the meeting. *Specialite de la maison*,” I babbled on and on, I heard Agata’s laughter, I was full of compassion and triumph; I now played an important role in your play—a maid who at the right moment has to shout to the unfaithful wife: ‘your husband is coming!’ A role for two seconds, but if she fails, the entire spectacle will fall apart. Agata laughed again, I directed you personally:

“And you must have brought an album with your stamp collection?” And I burst out laughing.

By then I stood near you, three or four steps below, and Agata made a face full of regret, the game could have gone on; now I couldn’t go away, you two couldn’t be left alone as it would create an ambiguous situation. Later, I thought, I will leave, and you will most likely leave with me, I will walk into a store, and you will return to Agata; and I was just about to say that now you must show me the stamps as well, I opened my mouth, I didn’t want to leave the stage quite yet.

Then I realized that you didn’t see me at all. I didn’t exist to you. I stood close and I now saw you well: you looked only at her and she was the only one there, there were no stairs nor a crack in the door. With your eyes drawn into her—and I closed my lips, and she saw your look and she leaned against the wall—with those eyes drawn in her you said:

“I am leaving Teresa.”

At first nothing happened, nobody said anything, nobody moved; your words walked towards me slowly, they were not put together yet, not yet meaning what they meant. Then I heard a rustle and Agata with her hands on her face began sliding down along the wall, lower and lower, until she bent her knees, her raincoat rustled with a shattered rustle on the oily wall; I grabbed the handrail, and she sat on the highest step, the step you stood on, and you bent down saying something to her, whispering, and I didn’t hear anything; and you sat next to Agata, your hands on her knees, from which one after another a glove fell down; your hands on her arms raised up; your hands on her palms covering her face. That face became uncovered, your fingers now surrounded her

from her temple to her chin and I didn't know such face of Agata, and I never heard her voice which said: "Us?"

Maybe you told her this in silence, because all I heard was silence, and her head landed on your chest, on your open coat, and you covered her before me with your arms, and then I let go of the handrail with my dead white hand, I turned around and began to run downstairs, crying; and then, crying, I returned a few steps up and I grabbed the handle of the cracked door, and feeling a light resistance behind it I shut it; but neither one of you even looked.

77

The two of you—she—spent the next week without me; once, after a week, she called, she asked if I understood. From the place in the hall where our telephone is you can see Joseph's chair; the widely present lines of his back, one arm and the back of the chair were hardly visible in the darkened room. He stared at the TV, Mark was sleeping; I felt terribly tired, lonely, and a thought crossed my mind that Joseph was gaining weight. She asked, "You understand, do you. I can't yet..." And I said, yes, that I understood.

"What do you understand?" Joseph asked, without taking his eyes off Kobra.
"Who were you talking to?"

"Leave me alone," I said, and Joseph turned his head towards me, very slowly, raising his one eyebrow: he must have been really surprised. He is going bald, I thought. I returned to the hallway, I looked into the mirror, and I lightly bit my fist.

Since the day you came to Agata intending never to leave—since that day Agata stopped writing in her journal almost completely. Almost completely, because a few days before May thirteenth, on the tenth or the eleventh, I don't remember which, she wrote an

understandable line, on an empty page. Big letters, diagonally, the words run from corner to corner, leaving no margin on either side, even though it was a short line.

“So it is not allowable, after all”—that’s what it said, and had you not treated her writings, papers, disorderly packets filled with fragments of a wide variety of unfinished sketches, poems that she hadn’t yet typed up, her reflections, and God knows what else, so had you not treated all this with such discretion—maybe you could have...

No, you couldn’t have. Neither you, nor me. Nobody.

I am trying to imagine how she was to you, how you were for each other at that time when Teresa mindlessly called the boys out from lessons, and, her lips squeezed hard, when she lead them, untrusting, unwilling, silent, stuck in a hostility not yet entirely resolved, when she lead them to the office, to your desk; good morning, you would say to your sons, but no answer came from their childishly pink, numb lips, I turned my eyes away from you, I hid my head in one of the closets, I took Theodore and Sewer out in the corridor, I didn’t want to see your gaze, the gaze that one day you put heavily on your wife—a gaze of hatred. She stood there, pushing your sons in front of her, and you said, and I, almost entirely hidden in the closet, wasn’t able to protect you from my hearing your words:

“You wish, it seems to me, that I stop being a father as well.”

“You promised to take them to some game in spring,” said Teresa with crushing resistance.

“We are old enough now,” said Pawel, or maybe Gawel, his voice unnaturally high. “We can go alone.”

“We can go alone,” repeated the other twin, blushing; I coughed, there was dust in the closet, I abandoned the pile of papers on the floor, I jerked up from my knees, and left the room.

I said I was trying to imagine how you were to each other during that month, but I cannot. I never got to know the amazing sadness of love threatened by everyone and everything, that love constantly and untiringly paying for all that with a magical sweetness of touch and silence, the dearest of words, with the passionate readiness to fight for itself, the tenderness and the joke, the race to serve one another in such a way that it would not seem a duty, obligation, fear; neither do I know what it means to cry out of love, cry so that the other, for whom or because of whom one cries, experiences the feeling of one’s endless power, the weight of one’s importance, impossible to carry; nor did I ever shiver in Joseph’s arms as she did in yours, I didn’t scream “more, more,” and I didn’t want to die the way she wanted to die with you submerged in her, with you searching and finding in her the explanation of everything you had broken for her, everything you had destroyed, thrown away, bloody and unnecessary. I could not ask Joseph with my hands on his suddenly cloudy face, on his temples, lips, hair, “what is it, what is it, darling, darling, whatever it is it is the same in me, you will see, I know it all, so tell me: one, two words and we will both have it, and together we can cope with it, and if we cannot, then we cannot together; let’s not separate by any sadness.”

“If you want, we can curse, we will curse horribly; if you want, I will cry because of you, because of myself, you will have to console me; if you want, I will think of the same as you, I will sit right here and think the same; if you want, I will go somewhere

immediately, anywhere, maybe you want to be alone; and if you want, I will dance a belly dance for you, and I will pin a clip to my navel.”

I wouldn't have dared to speak like this to Joseph, I wouldn't even have thought of such words. I read Agata's unfinished story, it was called “The two together,” and the two are you and her without any lipstick. She must have written it during that last month, because it is dedicated: “To You, already at Bielany.” This is how I know a little, how you were to each other, how you were to each other during this time which was your last, this is how I know that to know does not mean to imagine what one knows it is like.

After three weeks I couldn't wait any longer, so I visited her at the Radio. I had to wait, because she was talking to some young author about his work. She was severe and at the same time charmed by his story. I heard how, in a tone full of complaint, how she almost yelled at him. “How could you put something this low, this flat, next to this great scene? Where did you get this? This is not you! You are here, here!” and with her finger she showed him this wonderful page in his fiction.

“You will rewrite this, won't you?” she begged and she stared into his eyes as if she were in love with him. “You will rewrite this? You must listen to this scene, what makes it so good, you have to understand what makes it good; you will rewrite this, won't you?” She gently touched his arm. The boy, already on fire, answered in the most serious tone, as if he was giving an oath:

“I will try.”

“I know you will succeed, it is impossible for you not to succeed. You must bring it to me immediately,” she said, and I wondered whether at that moment anything beyond this boy's debut existed to her. She didn't even glance at me; from the corner I was

watching her face so alive and so changeable, the burning of emotions in her movements; her neck deeply exposed, she deeply rose her head to the boy, who stood up.

“How talented he is!” she said with excitement after he left. On one page there was something so fresh, you cannot imagine. He must be helped, I must help him.

“Yes, and on the way he of course will have to fall in love with you,” I laughed. “For a few months he will be unhappy.” She laughed too.

“No, wait, Sabina, don’t mock me. You will see, he will be a writer. If he is a writer, he will deal with every unhappiness better than everyone else. Will you have a cigarette? You are sweet, you are not mad and you came.”

And yet she wasn’t the same; something uncatchable and unknown, something impossible to be put in words moved into her eyes and the areas around her eyes; some clean wash, a touching shadow on darkening eyelids.

“Have you been crying Agata?” I asked with curiosity bordering with appetite for sensation.

“Have I been crying?!” she screamed. “My God!”

And she said with a simplicity that all my life I never managed to achieve,

“I cry every day now. All the time. I wash myself in tears. Him and myself,” she smiled, and I tore inside. “If he can endure this, it’s only because this is a cry out of happiness. I am used to it, and am afraid I won’t be able to go on without it.”

We lit cigarettes; she added with a charming seriousness, that actually it would be much worse if she were able to go on without it. With some difficulty I squeezed out a piece of question,

“So it is so for you?... And him?... How is he?”

“He is terribly hurt by himself,” she said calmly. “He is very sick. But no, he doesn’t know about it. I will not allow him to find out.”

“I don’t understand,” I said unsure, surprised. “Isn’t he happy? Isn’t he free?”

“He thinks he is happy. He thinks he is free. Don’t ask me to explain.” She looked into the thermos. “There is some coffee left. Do you want it?”

“Your fingers got slimmer,” I said with surprise, looking at her hands holding the pot and the cup. “You are slimmer all over, Agata. You are pretty, but somehow strange. And I don’t understand what you are saying.”

“I haven’t learned this lesson well yet,” she said and touched her breast. “Not yet. What I am saying is still all swimming on the surface,” she laughed and waved her head. “And so on, professor. One gets an “F” for this. But I will learn. In full sentence.”

She was strange, oh well; I said carelessly, lost in your affair, that “that Teresa” is not leaving him alone; that she comes to the office every day, or every other day, that she doesn’t care what people say.

“And she brings the kids with her, the poor woman,” I said; I saw how the skin on her face turns yellow, waxy. I felt terrible, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I said, I thought you knew about this, Agata.”

It was only after a while, after a terrible moment that she said,

“I should thank you for this, but I cannot. Not yet.”

78

It was only on May thirteenth at that tram stop where we had agreed to meet that she told me that you had not been telling her anything. Neither about Teresa pushing your sons in front of herself right at our office, nor about when one of the sons said in an

unnaturally thin and broken voice, “We can go on our own, without you.” You didn’t tell her about your visits to your house, in which no sign of an organized life remained:

Teresa fired Rose, and, entirely helpless, moving from one unfinished activity to another she would soon abandon, she would turn on the iron, vacuum the sofa, then run into the kitchen where milk had boiled over onto the stove. One day when you came the boys were looking for a recipe for potatoes. In a darkened room full of smoke Teresa writhed in tears. You stood facing her, and accused her of making an over-the-top ultimatum. You screamed. Then you run away.

“How do you know this?” I was holding her hand, but it was not her arm shaking, it was mine. “If he didn’t tell you about it, then how do you know?”

“Oh, he once told me. Five, ten sentences. Asked me to help him find some help for the house. The children—he said. And one day I returned home and he was on the phone with his mother. Oh no, he stopped talking. But his silence told me more than the few words that I did manage to hear.”

Around five in the afternoon, at the very peak of the peak of the Warsaw rush hour. You had a conference—I didn’t belong to the “high circle” in our office; I dropped Mark off a few days before that to Podkowa, Agata and I set up this awful meeting.

That day Joseph told me severely to dye my hair if I was to go gray this fast. I wanted to get Agata’s advice, I called her. If it weren’t for the bundle of gray hair above my ear, I wouldn’t have even been there. But I had been.

“Considering your type of skin, you won’t look good in any other color,” Agata said. “What you can do... yes, you should do it—dye your hair in a color similar to your natural; try something that will give them a sparkle of amber. It will look great.”

She consoled me and I didn't take any notice of her pale voice, the frightened nervousness of her movement. "I have a new hairdresser now," she said. "If you want, I can take you to him. On Zoliborz. He is great, and very nice, also funny. He doesn't impose anything, he will do anything you ask for."

We traveled to Zoliborz. The hairdresser had his salon on Wilson Square. Young, very slim, he wore black shoes with toes "sharpened as pencils," she whispered into my ear; I made an appointment for the next day, we chose the dye, it all gave me courage, I was now able to turn my attention from myself to her and to you.

"And his mother?"

"It's his mother," she said tiredly. "Whose side is she to be on? But it is not easy for her either."

We walked towards the tram stop, where I wanted to catch a tram to midtown. We were a few steps away from Wilson Square, when Agata hysterically pointed ahead, she said, "There;" her throat clattered.

I followed her hand, but there was nothing there: impersonal noise and crowd taking over one another impolitely, coarse, rushed Warsaw in the peak of the day. I looked at her; her hair was falling on her face because of the wind.

"What are you saying? What are you showing?"

"That's where she went. That's where she walked out of," she said. "From the store. That's how I saw her. Three days ago."

I saw her then too, Teresa, at the end of Agata's fingers. I saw how three days before Teresa had walked out of the store and walked along the wall, along the window displays, and she, Agata, had walked from the hairdresser just as we were walking from

the hairdresser together, and they were walking towards each other, and they both knew that neither one would want to run away, hide behind a gate, disappear, and they were approaching each other, Agata with that impatient walk of hers, the walk which a moment before she had seen Teresa carried her to you, still too slowly, and which suddenly carried her towards Teresa, who walked out of the store, heavy bags in her hands, I saw potatoes, Agata said, and she stood pushed by the passer-bys, and she looked at Teresa's path along the wall and the window displays, and I also, following her gaze, saw the potatoes smashing against Teresa's leg, and there was bread and some packages, and some lettuce, and they were approaching one another, and now they were approaching one another and no one else but one another, because they already had seen one another, here a flowery Agata with a shining head, straight from a hairdresser, and the other one, with heavy bags hanging at helpless hands. Then Teresa bounced off the wall and the window displays, she tore through to Agata, sharply jostled by people she passed by, she stood in front of Agata, and Agata stood in front of Teresa too.

“Those bags,” Agata said to me. “She extended them as if they were a weapon. Do you understand? Children, dinners. She can't do anything. She never had to cook.”

“Did she say something?” I whispered looking at the scene; the tram was ringing, the summery noise was reigning, they stood there, jostled and pushed: the beautiful for the lover Agata, and the other one, full of emptiness. Beauty and a head from the hairdresser, you see, are not always a woman's weapon; sometimes the best weapon is fatigue and ugliness. In Teresa's bag the potatoes aimed into Agata like granites, and Teresa understood this; she proceeded to attack.

“I only have one life,” she said. She was taller, her words swam across Agata’s raised head. She aimed precisely, according to the most sure of instincts; Agata shot in the eyes and brain should have died; and yet she stood there, touching the granite with her knees.

“And me?” she asked. She yelled sharply, quietly, “And me?! Do I have more?!”

And she pushed the bags away, shivering, and she ran. Something rolled around her legs, she stumbled upon it, and looked: it was a small grayish, bruised potato. The she bent down and picked it up.

79

We were standing at this tram stop on May thirteenth, and next to us someone was talking to someone about the book fair, and we were looking into that passed day, and she began to shiver.

“They have to separate as soon as possible,” I said through a narrowed, dry throat. “Divorce.”

“What do you mean, divorce? Divorce?” she asked, as if not understanding. And she asked in a begging tone, and I didn’t know what she was beginning me for, what she wanted from me; and today I do. “Would you get a divorce?”

“Me,” I said slowly, stupidly, “me... It’s a different story. I...”

“You see!” she screamed, she looked: with hatred? Her body, jostled by a boy running to a tram, waved; she held my arm, I supported her. “A cross,” she said through her teeth, straight into my ear. “You, the carriers of the cross...”

The tram went away, everything around calmed down, I could hear her breathe, her teeth were ringing, I thought that something had happened between you two. I withheld my fear and my tears and asked,

“Does he... not want to separate? For good?”

Then she blew up in a violent and rapid whisper; I held her arm hard from tense muscles; even now I still remember this grip and her skin, I feel my fingers pinned in her arm tanned, naked, warm softness, her skin—you know; and she was saying, her face turned to the sun, her eyes not even blinking under the broiling white light, she was telling me how she had gotten home that day, holding the small potato; the key was not under the door, so she knocked, you opened the door, you were sparkling and you welcomed her inside, and you said: “I “made” peas for dinner,” and “where were you, I cannot be without you,” and she was looking at you, and she started to cry, and she hugged you, and the potato fell on the floor. Then you recognized that her tears are no longer tears of happiness, and you grabbed her, so awfully small, you grabbed her in your arms, maybe you felt the threat already, and maybe her tears that were no longer tears of happiness released something inside you that had been the hidden truth; the truth behind the bars of the confessional: because you said to her shattered by crying, leaning towards that despair, “Wait. Please wait. My darling. My love. It will all settle down. It will all stop hurting. Just wait. You are more important than everything else.”

And this consolation, this begging request in your voice, became the confirmation of your injury, unmistakable solution of the rebus. You thought it was withheld—and it was, but not the way you thought, even though your breasts, your arms, your thighs, your knees, even though your entire being felt how that terrible despair gradually turns off,

how her shivering with tears head calms down under your lips. Her lips moved on your breast, on your thin shirt. Then they moved again.

“What are you saying, darling?”

“I said I love you,” she whispered. Her back raised slowly in a deep breath.

“Yes,” you said. “You are more important than everything else.” And you said sharply, suddenly, with one hand you reached for her face, “I will get a divorce.”

Your eyes were close to each other and you could see how her pupils, shining around the wet tears, began to look at you and beyond you, as if you did not present any realistic obstacle for them; then the pupils settled themselves softly in the sockets, under the long eyebrows.

“No,” she said and it was a whisper. “I don’t want to.”

You asked, startled. “What?”

“Go away.”

You didn’t understand. You had in front of you her face closed with eyelids, tense painfully like during a love torture. You didn’t understand; you said with the greatest tenderness,

“You are tired. I can see that you are also tired. It will go away. Everyone who... but at the end everyone gets used to it... You will see.”

“I want you to leave me. I want you to return there.”

“Agata!”

You let her go from your arms, but she continued to stand with her head raised, and she whispered,

“It is necessary for you to understand. You must help me. Yourself.”

“What are you saying! What are you saying, darling! But I want to,” you said, the ground was shaking underneath you, underneath the two of you, unstable, fragile,...

none. You said to this raised face, to those tense lips,

“I love you.”

Her face lowered, her flossy black head began to move away and you were looking down, and she bent on her knees, and she leaned her forehead on your knees, and you followed her, your knees on the hard wood.

“More important,” you said, begging. “Man must have something that’s most important. I will not leave you, do you understand? Not you.”

But she did see you cry.

80

We were standing at the tram stop; yet another tram set everything in motion for a moment, it spilled a wave of people at us, then it swallowed another one; I was still holding her arm, and why didn’t I understand anything beyond that she was suffering, Borys? I was still holding her hand, moving towards her, moving away from her, pushed by the crowd, and she also was moving towards me and away from me, pushed just like me, and she was quiet. Suddenly, the tram, ringing, began its journey, howling, a police car, with flashing blue star in a shaking air, drove by, and she said in an enchanted whisper, smiled to within, with blind eyes pinned at me, me who for a moment was not there at all, even though standing, faithfully holding her arm, she said,

“He loves me.”

“You see,” I said. “You see.”

“Jesus Mary,” groaned a woman behind my back. “They will close the kindergarten before I make it.”

“But there is a playground outside,” said another female voice. “Your son can wait on a bench.”

Agata was standing right next to me, shivering, I felt her shiver under my squashed fingers, separated from me by God knows what, what was swimming out of her and what remained inside, and whatever it was it was something that made me entirely useless, and I realized it; and I thought that this was a different life, a different level, not mine, and that the two of you will deal with it on another level, and I relaxed my fingers, living pink marks on her brown skin; at last it was getting late and the hairdresser—not the hairdresser: Joseph was probably home by now, and she was standing on another side of life, a side which I will never get to, and, in the fatigue that overtook me, I couldn’t think of anything else to say, so I repeated,

“You see.”

And Borys, I didn’t have the energy to notice that she returned, from enchantment she returned to unspeakable despair. Her eyes were once again begging and animal-like; an animal lonely in fear. I dragged her to the other side of the track, towards the road, I had to get going.

She obediently followed me; my tram was arriving from Potocka and I turned towards her to say goodbye, and the lonely animal peeked through her eyes, filling me with fascination and aversion. I held out my hand, and she said, “Sabina,” and I said, smiling, as if I didn’t see what I saw in her, but what was still to me incomprehensible.

“Till tomorrow. I will call you. Goodbye.”

“But I have to...” she said, her nails pinned in my hand, she looked around, she looked up and down, as if searching for something, something that could have come from anywhere, if it were to come.

“But I cannot,” she said, “I don’t want to.” And she looked at me surprised, and then she looked at the sky again, straight into the sun, and I freed my hand from in between her desperate fingers.

“All will be okay,” I said in a meaningless tone and people separated us, she had to move away, the tram arrived, it stopped. A chubby old woman climbed the steps in front of me, I tightened my hand around the handrail, already on the steps I turned my head looking for Agata. She stood next to the curb. Someone walked through her face, then I saw her again: she seemed like a stranger. I yelled when the tram, ringing with metal, moved forward,

“Goodbye!”

She took a step forward, a step following the tram and me, and she said something, slightly spreading her lips, but I didn’t hear it, I climbed on top of the steps and looked out, and she took a step back; I raised my hand, I waved, and she took a step forward, violently, as if about to run. I waved again, and as I was waving, she took a step backwards and with her back she threw herself on the tracks.

81

“Sit down, child,” said the priest, who appeared out of nowhere, on Bielany and Zoliborz there is so many of them, and he sat on the curb, sliding me behind him; and so we sat next to someone’s plastic raincoat which covered the shapeless shape. From afar we were surrounded by a forest of people without faces, police scattered around on the

corners, blue pawns. A few steps away from us, also on the curb, next to an open door of a truck with a red stain on its tire—sat a man, his head on his knees.

“Did this child believe in God?”

“No,” I said. “Yes. No. I don’t know.”

“Yes it is then. Let God have mercy on her. Did someone leave her?”

“No,” I said. “Now... He left his wife...for her,” I said. Nausea climbed up to my throat. I complained, “I don’t understand.”

“Later,” said the priest in a sharp voice. “Divorce? And he married her?”

“No. All the years,” I said. “Years. Because he is a Catholic... Only now. I don’t understand.”

“Oh,” he said. “*Non intres in iudicium cum servo tuo, Domine...*”

“I don’t understand,” I said. I swallowed the bitter saliva, the sun was broiling: a brick on a head. “So many years. And now she could be hap... but she wasn’t,” I said, surprised. I coughed up bitterness from the depths of my throat.

“No,” the priest said dryly. “No. Pray, my child.”

“I ca... can’t,” I said, covering my mouth. “I don’t understand.”

“So think,” he said. “Try to think.” If one cannot pray, one must think.”

“Suicide,” I said from behind my hand. The nausea crowded in waves; I searched for his hand and found it.

“Poor is our testimony,” the priest said. Then he was quiet, inaudibly moving his lips. His rough fingers surrounded my wrist. “Thank God for He doesn’t need witnesses. Nor prosecutors. It is the only court on which it is easiest to prove oneself innocent.”

I asked, nausea moving backwards, mist spreading around my head, “What?”

“People die for different things,” said the priest. “Human actions,” he said to himself. “Only the first word belongs to man.” He touched the plastic raincoat with his hand. “Wherever there is a victim there must be hope, my child. You don’t believe that?”

My head was sliding down, leaning onto his arm. “Christ,” I said. From the mist and the lightness I mumbled, “Christ.”

When I opened my eyes at the emergency room, the priest was gone. I will never recognize him: I didn’t see the face. There was a big bald head lightly resting on my breasts. The doctor rose and put a dry, warm, nice as a leaf palm on my forehead. He said,

”Your heart is fine. But, my dear, you are pregnant.”

82

Joseph doesn’t know this. You are the first. As she was, before. I still have him, Joseph, ahead of me. We have awfully a lot ahead of us, Borys. Yes: and you too.

I don’t know yet; I... Everything I knew I said; I said it to you. The things that are left are the unspeakable ones. Those we may never...

But I want to know this—what is underneath the ruins. Coal stone, you say; in the insights of the earth under a dead tree an undead root, and from this root one day a forest

- - -