



A Short Story About
Andrzej and Roman

Charlene Caprio

Remko Caprio

*Struggle for transcendence
in post-communist Poland*

A Short Story About Andrzej and Roman

CHAPTER 1

Andrzej's head jerked up from a jolt of pain. Without opening his eyes, he stretched his limbs and rolled his head until he found a comfortable position to slip back into a gurgling slumber. Early morning progressed imperceptibly. Then, at approximately nine o'clock an ice-blue winter sky emitted a bright light that shone through the window and scolded his eyes.

Andrzej was disoriented, saw only orange and could not identify his location. He was not above the Leczyca train station in his studio apartment. He had not heard the squeaky metal sounds of the local train grinding its breaks below his window or the bustle of farmers pushing rickety carts full of vegetables over the tracks. Andrzej hated the sight of those farmers unloading themselves off the train, scurrying into town like a pack of rats. He never bought his vegetables at the farmers market. When they grabbed for potatoes and stacked them onto their lying scales, their hands were never clean. This morning, however, Andrzej did not hear the farmers' carts bumping over the tracks.

As the blood in his head began churning, his eyes regained focus. He recognized on the far wall of his office his ink drawing of a woman's form hanging on a cross. He created the drawing on December 13, 1981, the night martial law was declared in Poland. Andrzej had been working late in his studio and a rude knock at the door forced him out of his chair. Two military officials walked in without invitation and pronounced him in violation of the curfew. Andrzej laughed at the ridiculous tone of their voices, for they must have been joking. He was just working in his own studio. But the two soldiers did not take to his laughing; they began confiscating any tool that might be used for a weapon. They even took his toolbox filled with oil paints because Andrzej refused to state its contents. They ordered him into their military car and drove him to the police station.

After spending an hour in a cold cell he was questioned. In the middle of the night they drove him back to his apartment. Once inside, Andrzej tried to calm down but couldn't. He was boiling over with anger that strangers, at a deciding whim, could establish their control over the course of his life. His thoughts raced uncontrollably from blind anger at the military officials who had searched his studio, to the officer who had interrogated him and insulted him with futile questions, to this country, to the world, but it didn't solve his frustration. Finally, he grabbed a black ink pen and white paper and drew a figure of a woman hanging on a cross. "Matka Polska," he wrote with a red pencil on the bottom left corner. This is what the country's own people were doing to her, and the country was going to suffer for many years because of it. Moscow's puppets closed Poland's borders and air space. Andrzej could not fly back to his beloved Paris even if he had the money to. He was imprisoned within his own country. From this day on he hated all military officials, policemen and even worse, the so-called politicians who pulled their strings.

Andrzej often looked at this drawing and remembered that bitter cold night when he hated most of all belonging to this country. But this morning, as his eyes cast a bleary stare onto the drawing, he was not thinking of any of this. Instead, fragmented images of the previous night danced across his vision. Andrzej smiled with the satisfaction of a winner and began to reconstruct the magical events.

"Ela, Elzbieta, sweet Eliza," he had sung to three drunkards who were lying on a bench in the main square just a few minutes after the church toller rang the midnight bells. One of the drunkards snarled back at him with slurping, unintelligible remarks. The other two chimed in with drunken nonsense and the three washed up faces looked idiotically at Andrzej who of course knew that their simple minds could not see nor comprehend the flame of passion that burns through an artist when he experiences a special encounter with another artistic soul in the world. They probably thought he was mocking them, but in a moment of sincere compassion Andrzej almost felt like embracing them. For a moment in the midst of the night they appeared to be truly free souls, albeit cast off and unaware.

The wind cut against his face as he skipped across the main square. All around him the town was asleep; the night's silent crisp black air embraced his racing thoughts. For the first time in December, Andrzej did not hate the Polish winter for its hostile, bitter coldness. Tonight winter delivered to him new life, a reverberating stream of desire and promise, burning with the kindles of youth. The moon high up in the black sky, though distant and frozen, glowed a mystical blue. Life was surely renewed in Andrzej, and he skipped along in drunken celebration.

"Ela, Elzbieta, sweet Eliza." Quickly now, he replayed all the details of last night with delight. Around eight o'clock yesterday evening, Andrzej had gone to the Devil's Inn in order to receive payment for one of his paintings. Stanislaw, the owner of the Devil's Inn, had purchased the painting over eight months ago, but never rendered payment. The painting is of a young, but maturely seductive, innocent girl sitting on a bench in the main square (a bench very similar to the one that was occupied by the three drunkards). She is wearing a short sundress on a bright summer afternoon. Her legs are in a childish pose that reveals to the observer, or voyeur, of the painting a triangle of her pink underwear. Behind her, Baruta is standing on the castle watchtower, marking her with his hungry eyes and sealing her fate.

Local myth holds that a devil named Baruta once lived in the abandoned castle of the town, and came out only when he was hungry for a virgin. He would stalk his prey for weeks unnoticed, until he snatched her up, dragged her back to the castle, locked her in the dungeon and tortured her. Three days after the capture he would kill his prey and eat the virgin's flesh. Two years would pass before he would get hungry again and search out another delicious prey.

The town's castle, built by Kazimierza the Great in the second half of the fourteenth century, hosted high nobility when Leczyca was still the thriving capital of the region and the town was made of wood instead of cement. The myth of Baruta is said to derive from

a real nobleman who captured, raped and killed a few girls of the town. But this was hundreds of years ago, even long before the Prussian Empire claimed this part of Poland. Today, the castle is little more than one reconstructed high brick wall and a watchtower decorated with a white-rimmed parapet.

Stanislaw had guaranteed Andrzej on the Monday before that for sure this time he would have the payment in full on Friday. Andrzej heard this promise a dozen times before from Stanislaw, and was a bit ticked off by now. But he didn't press Stanislaw too much, because first and foremost Andrzej enjoyed seeing his painting occupy the central space on the main wall of the tavern, which was the most popular (and pricey) tavern in town and attracted over twenty city people every month traveling along the Warsaw-Lodz main road. Sometimes one of these city people would ask Stanislaw about the painting and Stanislaw would explain that the painter was Andrzej Adamczewski, the town's famous artist. Stanislaw knew that Andrzej had studied art in Paris one summer, and so he told this detail to all the inquirers, or at least, made Andrzej believe he did.

Andrzej entered the tavern this night with the intention of collecting the payment once and for all. However, no sooner had he entered than was he immediately startled by an unfamiliar girl misplaced at a table close to the bar. She looked distinguished in a woolen burgundy sweater with a wide collar that exposed her porcelain like collarbones. She was inherently removed from the local slugs at the bar- the moldering provincials that Andrzej detested.

An inquisitive murmur and cheap jokes filled the thick smoke that hung above the bar. The crude villagers examined her boldly, and some simply turned their stools to stare at her. Her black boots were elegant, made of real leather Andrzej could surmise. Actually, they were the upscale variant of the winter boot style currently being sold at both shoe stores in town. Real leather though definitely Polish. As he noticed her calves were thin and smooth like those of a cosmopolitan fashion model, an inkling of delight rushed through him and he remembered the chic women he had seen in Paris, promenading along Champs Elysées. Her daring short hairstyle was definitely cut by a new boutique. A longer look at her deep almond eyes, fair skin and maroon hair convinced Andrzej she was from Lodz. He knew maroon was the current fashion in Lodz, and that Warsaw was exhibiting blonds.

The girl noticed Andrzej's bold stare and challenged it with playful eyes.

"Later, not now, okay? Later," Andrzej whispered to Stanislaw who called him from behind the bar. Now the payment could wait. And besides, Stanislaw would just come up with another flimsy excuse as to why he had the money in the morning, but an extraordinary event rendered the money from his pocket again. Preoccupied by the mysterious city girl, Andrzej ordered a Jack and Coke before Stan could get a word in. Stan was all too familiar with Andrzej's fascination for young beauties and just smiled as he fetched the drink, then retreated to wash out some beer mugs and observe Andrzej's performance. The bar rogues peered in with curiosity. Andrzej ignored them as he looked into a small mirror behind the bar check out his appearance. He loved the way his black

turtleneck wrapped around his neck, and contrasted with his silvery white hair. It made him look artistically demure. For sure she must realize that he does not really exist in the same world as these rogues.

Elzbieta all the time kept a self-assured distance, sitting on a high stool with one leg crossed over the other, and her back arched forward exaggerating her round apple breasts. “She must be no older than twenty years old,” Andrzej thought with a fine devilish grin, “and as she is here alone, she won’t mind making my acquaintance.”

With a prowling smile he strolled toward her. “My God!” he exclaimed as he placed his drink on the bar, “A diamond in Lezcyca! For so long my eyes have been punished to look at coal. Faces of coal all around me!”

Elzbieta laughed coquettishly at his joke, while knowing that in this dingy tavern she was indeed as much out of place as a diamond in a coal mine.

“Would you mind if I joined you for a drink?” he asked, and pulled up a stool.

“No, of course not, I could use one more apple juice and vodka,” she answered, and moved her glass toward the edge of the table. Andrzej quickly turned to the bar, gave the glass to Stan who stood very close at hand and gestured to him to bring another drink for the young lady. He turned back to Elzbieta and introduced himself as “Andrzej Adamczewski, artist and owner of Andrzej Design Studio.”

Seeing a welcoming sparkle in her eyes, he knew at this point she welcomed the flirtatious exchange. She squinted her eyes with a playful glance, and listened attentively to his monologue as Andrzej warned her that she should be more careful flashing her beauty in front of ravenous animals like the ones sitting at the bar.

“Just look at them...they would die for one nibble on your ear!”

Her unrestrained giggle revealed her immaturity, but she pressed her back straight and challenged him with a self-assured independence beyond her nineteen years. Leaning forward on the table he whispered, “What is your name?”

“Elzbieta, but my friends call me Eliza,” rolled off her seductive tongue.

”Eliza! How sweet.”

Andrzej could never distinguish if it was the easiness of his words that made him so sympathetic to women, or if it was his sympathy for women, which made his words sound so easy in their company. But as it occurred, Eliza showed an immediate interest in him, happy to be entertained by this relatively dapper man. Andrzej wasn’t sure if she tried to cover it bashfully or if she tried to display it flirtatiously, but she clearly emitted a scent of erotic attraction. He could surmise when women accepted his flattery with warm gratitude or if they answered coldly and obligingly to his words. He had learned not to

question it too strongly, but instead to play along. He allowed them to decide the course of their relation, until he felt no longer entertained. Andrzej was quite at home among women, and knew exactly what to say to them or how to behave. He could even be silent in their company without feeling the slightest awkwardness. An elusive charm was in his appearance and his disposition apparently attracted women. He knew how to attract their sympathies, he was aware of this and was attracted to them by the same invisible force.

Their trite conversation continued until they established an equal grounding and leaned toward each other with more ease. Each word no longer held the weight of yes or no. Indeed, they reached a proper level of flattery where both of them felt good about themselves and intrigued with each other.

“What brings you to Lezcycyca?”

"I came to see the Kieslowski festival at the town cinema. I just happened to read about it in the back of a newspaper two days ago and I had to come. Also, my aunt lives here. I haven't seen her for two years. With the festival happening, I knew it was time to visit her again. Do you like Kieslowski's films?"

“Of course! He's one of my favorite directors, a prophet who died too young! I'm still in mourning over his death.” Andrzej pulled his black turtleneck over his chin and bent his head down in prayer. He finished his joke with a playful growl and placed her hand on his.

“I prefer the new generation of directors,” Eliza confessed, “but I do love *The Trilogy*.”

“You must be a student at the university.”

“No, Lodz Film School.”

“Ah! From the Lodz Film School. A cinematographer?” Andrzej was ecstatic.

“More an aspiring director,” Eliza tried to be modest.

“Wow! A crazy diamond, brilliant and in possession of genius,” Andrzej exclaimed, touching her petite arm which bore a thin silver bracelet that dangled in the air above the table. "Did you know how much Kieslowski hated the dogma of genius and how he avoided publicity? It is rare for me to find a kindred soul of the arts. Around here, people don't realize the necessity of art for the soul.”

“Aren't people like that anywhere?”

“Blah, I can't stand people who walk around spitting off nonsense from their tongues without pondering the greater depth of life. Unwashed souls, that's what Witkacy called them, people who never reflect, or question themselves or dare to understand why they perform the actions that they do, why they have fallen into the most despicable habits.

This town is infested with them.”

Andrzej lifted the girl’s delicate fingers and smelled them, as if they were emitting a divine aroma.

“To touch the hand of genius, what a divine privilege,” Andrzej flattered her.

Lowering her head, she withdrew her fingers and grabbed for her purse. She rummaged through it, pulled out a small stack of wallet-sized portraits held together by a rubber elastic and placed it on the table.

“I collect portraits, just the size that will fit in my palm.” As she began flipping through the pile, she explained that she believed from the details of a person's face one can calculate the levels of fear and desire in the person’s soul. "These two elements, fear and desire, determine how a person lives his or her life. The rest is just circumstance."

Andrzej felt a tingle in his heart, believing that this young girl was indeed bursting with artistic passion, the insatiable desire to embrace both human yearning and tragic wisdom.

“Do you think that you can read a person’s soul from his or her face?” she asked.

Andrzej didn’t immediately answer but scrutinized a few of the pictures. They were thumb-sized pictures varying from small black and whites to fragments of family shots. Some were yellowing, others seemed as if they were taken yesterday. But they all were portraits in the sense that one’s eyes were immediately drawn toward the face of the person in the photograph.

“This is fascinating,” Andrzej whispered, “where do you find such portraits?”
“I don’t know, just anywhere.”

Andrzej singled out a portrait of a young boy that looked with a frantic stare into the camera, a soul clearly possessed by fear. His blond hair was natty and disheveled.

“Look at this kid, he stares bewildered at the world of which he seems no part.”

“I love that picture,” Ela replied, “I think he is mentally retarded or something. I believe he is deeply hurt, rejected by the world but still he is so willful and independent.”

“The deep roots of insanity are planted in his mind, you’d better avoid such eyes,”
Andrzej played.

“What is fascinating,” Eliza put forth, “is that all these people were alive at the moment their picture was taken. Now, many of them are probably dead.”

“Do you think you can tell from a photograph whether a person is dead or alive?”
Andrzej asked, and Ela slapped his shoulder playfully because she knew from where he

had stolen the line.

“So you are a die hard Kieslowski fan.”

“He was a prophet, I said.”

Silence fell over them as they scrutinized more portraits until, encountering a familiar face, Andrzej broke the silence with a gasp. "That's Krystof Kieslowski himself! Where did you get this picture?"

"I found it in a yearbook at the library and clipped it out."

"In his youth he wore his hair wild like that. You see! The genius in him had already formed at that age, you can see it in the way the light of the world is reflected in his eyes." Andrzej suddenly looked up at Ela and stared right into her eyes, "It is the same way the light of a promise is shining in your eyes. Never let it die out, the future depends on it."

Two more drinks were ordered as the evening progressed, then another two and Andrzej forgot about time as the atmosphere became so wonderfully wrapped up in the conversation with this beautiful and young aspiring student.

Twenty minutes to midnight Ela looked at her watch and, shocked by the time, exclaimed that she had to return home so as not to worry her aunt.

"Where does your aunt live?"

Upon hearing the address, which demanded a walk past the federal prison, Andrzej insisted on walking her home. Ela did not object to his proposal and they both stood up. Andrzej enjoyed the victory of numerous eyes at the bar following them to the door. He knew that leaving together would immediately ignite a fire of spread of gossip among the locals.

Outside they turned left and walked toward Ela's house. Andrzej lead her through a dark alley that winded down past the prison, four blocks from the Devil's Inn. Silhouettes of prisoners pressed against the windows. Ela looked up and waved.

“They're caged up like lonely animals,” she exclaimed.

“That's because they are animals! Murderers and rapists are up there, looking down on you. I wouldn't smile your pretty smile to them if I were you.” His words jilted her and she withdrew her waving hand. They continued down the road and approached the castle yard.

“You must know,” Andrzej whispered into Ela's ear, “this town is haunted. Inside the castle lives a devil named Baruta. They say that when he is bored, which isn't too hard

around here, he comes out of his castle and takes the form of a villager to roam around and pretend to be a normal person. He likes to buy kielbasa at the butcher on Kaliska Street. But he comes out when he is looking for a new pretty girl to take back to his dungeon. Last year, when an eight year old girl named Anna was found dead in her bed, the butcher cried out that just two days earlier a stranger with diabolic eyebrows and a bumpy forehead bought five kilos of his finest smoked kielbasa.”

“Stop it, Andrzej, you’re giving me the creeps with your story. I would almost think you are that devil.”

Andrzej smiled. “I’m sorry, I’m teasing. But be careful with those criminals. They sit in their cages and wait for a chance to break out.”

Andrzej and Ela reached a dead end, where a dimly lit door gave way to a staircase. Thinking about how these apartments were supposed to be torn down and rebuilt three years ago, he walked her up to the third floor.

“This is it,” she placed her free hand on the buzzer.

She slipped in the door quickly, without giving Andrzej the chance to kiss her fine lips. As he walked onto the street, he looked back and saw a light switching on at the third floor of the apartment block. He walked to the other side of the street to get a better view and peeped at the distant image of Ela standing behind a lace curtain, pulling her sweater over her head and then grabbing on to the sides of her jeans. Her womanly form in bra and underwear walked over to the far wall and disappeared into darkness. With a light feeling of regret he headed home, past yellow glowing prison windows that beheld the eternal faces of the condemned, staring out at freedom.

Although Andrzej did not get the chance to slide his hands over Eliza’s firm body, he nevertheless was on the top of the night from meeting this wonderful girl from Lodz. Fine whiskey rushed through his head and he felt incredibly refreshed walking through the bitter cold air, as if his face was immersed in an ice-cold spring. He was drunk and filled with new life. He didn’t want to go home, and so decided to drop by his office. His mind boiled with impressions that urged to find form. He needed to draw a picture of Ela immediately, to capture her beauty on canvas.

Crossing the town’s main square, he encountered the three drunkards lying on a bench. He sang “Ela, Elzbieta, sweet Eliza” and danced in front of the benches, proceeded past the town hall and entered the door to the left of the grocery store. He walked up the stairs and walked into his office. He picked up a pencil to begin drawing the sexy figure of Ela on a piece of paper. Closing his eyes for just a moment to recapture her image, the pencil slipped through of his fingers and his head fell onto his arms sprawled out over his desk.

CHAPTER 2

A bang on the front door startled Andrzej awake. Roman, his apprentice, walked in unnoticed and sat down in the front room. Andrzej only realized his presence upon hearing the small clicking of Roman's Zippo lighter. He then heard Roman throw the lighter on his desk and lean far back in his chair. Andrzej took a quick look at his watch and saw it was nine o'clock.

"Damn him," Andrzej thought, "Roman must have walked in, seen me asleep, then went about to waste the day at my expense." He could hear the various sounds of Roman carrying out petty actions at a calm, self-satisfying pace. He had to put him to work before he would waste his whole day.

"Roman!"

Roman seemed to purposely defy him by never answering on the first call.

"Roman! How did you get in?"

"Through the front door."

"Make me some coffee!"

"We're out of it, I told you yesterday." Roman shuffled into Andrzej's office. He took on a look of shock as he caught sight of Andrzej.

"You look like hell."

"I didn't ask you what I look like. Go buy some coffee and hurry back. We have a lot of work to do today."

"With what money?"

"In the mug of course."

"It's empty," and Roman turned around to go back to his office but Andrzej grabbed a ten zloty bill out of his wallet and slammed it on his desk.

"Here. So go! And don't visit that girl Dorota of yours. Come right back because I've got to have that billboard for Zywiec finished this morning. All you had to do was align the text to the logo, what's taking so long?"

"It's not done because every time I sit down to work on it you order me to go and buy coffee or get cigarettes or ink. There's always something else to be done first." Andrzej hated the sight of Roman's face, the strange bumps on his cheeks and the wild hairs in his brows, and the way he stared at him with a dumb, meaningless expression.

"Damn Roman, you waste half my days by arguing all the time, why can't you just do

what I ask you to and start earning your paycheck? Go and buy coffee now."

Roman picked up the ten zloty bill off the desk and walked out, leaving the front door ajar.

He watched him leaving the room with sore relief, happy to be alone again. At times he simply could not bare the blunt look of simplicity that stared back at him, day after day. At times he also could not listen to the impulsive tones and uncouth phrases that came out of Roman's mouth.

He had grown to abhor Roman's lack of understanding for the refinements in life. In the beginning of Roman's service as an apprentice, Andrzej tried to uplift his peasant soul, which he had to endure around his office continuously. He naively believed that it was his inexperience that made him awkward and dumb looking, and that with time and patience he would turn into a pleasant and helpful assistant. With the best of intentions he tried to expose Roman to '*les grandes oeuvres des beaux-arts*,' but with the passing of time he could not help developing a more cynical attitude toward him. He stopped seeking to bridge their mutual distance and Andrzej came to accept Roman's presence as a necessary evil that comes with running a business. Mostly he assigned Roman the low-level work that was almost impossible to screw up, and he made him keep the place in order. Roman on his turn found a reluctant way to perform his tasks obediently enough, while retaining his position as an apprentice.

Roman walked down the stairs with a heavy feeling in his limbs. He hated to be so dependent on this stupid job. Of course he was lucky to be making some money and he could be worse off than working at Andrzej Design Studio, but he hated having to take orders from Andrzej. He sent him on the pettiest errands while he was really hired to assist Andrzej in his design work. He remembered well how Andrzej offered the possibility to him to help design advertisements, but so far Andrzej has just bossed him around and ordered him to clean up his messes. It was as if Andrzej tried to keep him down, denying him his creativity and independence. If you tried to show talent or individuality, if you stuck out your neck, it was chopped off.

CHAPTER 3

No longer bothered by the choking presence of Roman and relieved by his retrieved solitude, Andrzej stood up. He felt the craving of his thirsty body and yearned for something to wet his dry throat. He picked up his coffee mug, walked out of his office, went down the hall to the bathroom and poured himself a glass of tap water. Upon returning to his office, he noticed a blank piece of paper and pencil on his desk. He immediately remembered the vivid image of Eliza.

His mind jumped back and forth with amorous desire. He picked up the pencil and began the drawing he intended to create last night. He remembered lines from a poem he loved to read: "The eyes of black lightning, alike the night her curls."

He thought to draw her in an empty room, hardly to be called a room in the real sense of the word, but more of a stage set, lying on an oversized bed with white sheets and white walls. A small window would offer a single view out onto the world, a view of the sea and the horizon concealing a new world beyond. Ela would lay on the bed naked with her head resting on soft pillows, staring upwards, transcending her body to revel in a stream of thoughts. The viewer would be dazzled at how genius is coupled with such a perfect body. Her chest would be turned to face the viewer, and her legs slightly spread apart. To the left would be a table, holding a video camera. The viewer would be tempted to pick up the camera and turn art into sensual pleasure.

Line by line he tried to unveil Ela's divine form hidden in the white paper. He could almost feel the taut flesh of her inner thighs in his bare hands. One hand stroke brought alive the soft velvety touch of her belly, another reached for the glimmering crescent below her left round apple breast. He grabbed a shoebox filled with color pencils (how long it has been since he opened that shoebox!) and tried to mix lines of cyan with yellow to enhance the shadows of her flesh, but it seemed impossible to catch the depth of her severity. If he could just catch the seductive mixture of darkness and illumination in her eyes, what ecstasy a viewer would experience! Andrzej smiled and felt more and more excited by the intuitive beauty rising within his soul. Did it really matter were one lived when one could experience enlightenment anywhere, and encounter such a creation? How long it had been since he felt so inspired.

He had to see her again!

Andrzej opened the window to let in some air. A breeze entered, and carried with it a poisonous smell of burning tar.

“Argh, for the devil’s sake, what smell!”

He coughed up the lousy taste and promptly shut the window, but stood still to observe the spectacle outside for a few moments. Four men were working to fill up one pothole: one to mix the tar, one to pour it into the hole, one to flatten it with a roller and one to smoke a cigarette. They were using terribly outdated manual tools and Andrzej knew that most of the money for road reconstruction disappeared into the pocket of the mayor’s son, who was appointed deputy of the town’s newly formed reconstruction and development department.

Andrzej needed a shower and decided to use the old shower stall at the end of the hallway. He actually always made sure to have some spare clothing in his office in cases like today when he didn’t make it back to his apartment. He used a raggedy hand towel hanging near the stall to dry himself off. While cleaning his hands off, he looked at his Roland watch hanging on the doorknob and saw that the morning had already disappeared.

Andrzej cursed himself for having let so much time pass. He needed to finish the Zywiec

order by close of the working day. When he entered his studio again, he looked at the drawing on which he was working. He felt unavoidably drawn to the curving lines on the paper. Carefully he worked to shape the form into an image of Ela. Her hips were too narrow; he grabbed an eraser on his desk and began erasing her hips. However, instead of erasing, her hips smudged into a muddied blot. Andrzej threw the eraser across the room. "Damned Roman, I specifically told him not to buy this crap Polish brand anymore. He really can't do anything right. Where is he anyway? I need a cup of strong coffee."

CHAPTER 4

Roman stepped outside and, with a mixture of reluctance and indifference, dragged himself toward the grocery store. The local drunkards –the same ones that drank from morning to midnight in the public square and had witnessed Andrzej return from his evening with Ela- greeted him at the entrance. They laughed in a bewildered friendliness. He knew who they were, and a few years ago was even friends with some of them. However, he chose not to extend them a greeting. The youngest of the three, Pawel, would not let him walk by unnoticed. He called out to him begging for some change with the word *przyjaciel*. But Roman did not want to think about their past friendship. Those were his drinking days. Now he was an apprentice, albeit an apprentice to an indignant master, he was nevertheless employed by the most popular design studio in Lezcyca, and one could see the results of his work throughout town.

Roman worked hard for his money every single working day and deserved some dignity now. Moreover, his office was situated on the second floor facing the market square in the same building as where the town attorney held office, as well as an accountant and even a dentist. Practically everyday Roman shook hands with the town's most important people. He knew them by name and engaged in short conversations with them. Roman couldn't afford to be seen conversing with Pawel; he belonged to different circles now. He didn't deny that once he too stood at that abyss of inebriety, but he had the character to turn around and make something of his life, to take on some responsibility.

Roman responded to Pawel with a quick no, replacing the intimate *przyjaciel* with a cold *znajkomy* and continued on his way, hoping that no one had witnessed their short exchange. He quickly entered the grocery store.

One thing Roman hated about his work was having to carry out these unimportant assignments. He was forced to obey Andrzej's every command by the silent threat of unemployment, as if he didn't earn any respect for the work he did. He felt as if everyone could see how he was ordered around by Andrzej to do such mindless, degrading work. But he would do his best at what he could do and learn what he didn't yet know. If Andrzej wouldn't give him the respect that he deserved, he would simply start his own studio and be his own boss when the time was right. To run a business you just need some good clients and luck really. You just need to be friends with the right people, and Roman already knew who you needed in this town and who you didn't.

The cheap doorbell rang in his ears as he made his way across the gray and white

linoleum floor to the counter. The selection on the shelves behind the counter wasn't much in terms of food: rice, canned vegetables, bags of green and red cabbage salad, pickled herring, some potatoes and onions, milk and juice in cartons, sardines, yogurts, cookies and chocolates, an assortment of Polish coffee, Nescafe and a few remaining loaves of bread. To the left of the counter was a cooler filled with frozen vegetables and ice cream. To the right, four shelves dedicated to a wide selection of domestic and imported liquor and beer, and one to cigarettes. Two elderly pear shaped women ran the store. He didn't like them. Of course they remembered how he used to hang out on their steps and throw empty beer bottles into their gutter. He felt they looked at him as if they wanted to castigate him for his past behaviors and boot him out of the store. But who knew, really. Maybe they just liked when a man stayed a drunkard because it brought them better business.

One of the drunkards stood outside leaning against the window with soiled pants and sweaty hair. He counted his change and found in his palm what amounted to a few pennies short of a bottle of the cheapest wine. The man banged on the glass window and looked to Roman for help, but Roman just shrugged his shoulders. A small boy ran in to buy an ice cream. The women catered to him first and Roman took the time to look at all the exotically designed liquor bottles. What really attracted his eyes was a bottle of Bacardi Rum. In just seven more weeks Roman would be able to buy that bottle, with a few grosze here and there taken from the mug. He considered with whom he would share it. Dorota? No. She was good, but not worth a bottle of Bacardi.

"What will it be? I don't have all day," the shop assistant sneered at him. Roman got the great idea to surprise Dorota and buy a beer for them to share. "Half a kilogram of Tschibo Arabian blend, a pack of Popularne and one Zywiec." Roman paid for the goods, placed the bottle of beer in his coat pocket and the coffee and cigarettes in a little white grocery bag. He exited the store, passed the drunkards and crossed the town square without once looking back up at the window of Andrzej Design Studio. He would just tell Andrzej if he would ask any questions that he needed to visit his mother who was ill. Besides, he worked over a half hour overtime last week and deserved to take a small break. Or, he could skip his lunch break to make up for any lost time.

His heart sped up when he joined in with the mid-day activity on the market square. He liked to be a part of the crowd and even more to thrust himself into the center of it and walk along with the rushing stream. Dozens of people were hastening home or on their way to some job of a sort. The men donned plum, gray and olive green suits. Some of the women wore suits as well, with thick nylons and spiked heels. It was the hour when young mothers strolled their babies around, purchasing a new pair of socks or a bonnet. Small Fiat 500's of varying colors were parked on the surrounding sidewalks. The unusually bright sun beat down on their windows, transforming them into fiery mirrors. Roman walked briskly with squinting eyes and avoided familiar faces. He knew that Dorota's husband had already set off for the city, leaving her and their three-year-old alone in the apartment until five in the evening.

Ulitsa Lubianska, the unpaved and bumpy road on which Dorota's apartment was located had become dangerous and unfavorable in the last five years. The Soviet-style block apartments were in desperate need of repair, but the local government paid no attention. It just let the unpainted facades slant further and further in decay, the colorless cement walls crumbling away in places. Lights were never strung up; thieves and muggers could hide easily in the shadows. No law abiding citizen, aside from the residents of Lubianska, carried himself through this alley, certainly not at night. When locals gossiped about the street they would repeat the phrase, *Diablo movie, Dobre noc* (The Devil says goodnight), meaning that God had abandoned this part of town to the devil. There were four blocks of houses here built next to each other, with a common playground in between each of them. Some children were playing in the sand, while a group of teenage boys loitered in front of one of the entrance portals.

It wasn't so bad during this time of day. Bright sunshine reached down into the buildings' crevices, enough to separate grease and urine stains from the rogues. A foul smell was always present, but Roman had long gotten used to it and didn't even snuff his nose anymore while walking to Dorota's. She and her husband were trying to get a new apartment for years but it was just impossible. They had been lucky to get a place of their own when they had gotten married. At the time her husband was still working for the municipality who owned the housing blocks and he was able to arrange a favorable deal with the director of the housing department. But now, only money could buy you a nice apartment and that was something of which they did not have much. There were also no banks around where they could loan any money even if they would be approved for a loan by any miracle. And it was only recently that a bank planned to open a local branch in Lowicz, the next town.

On the left side of the road, behind a high barbed wire wall existed the high-security federal prison. The prisoners looked down on Lubianska street from their barred windows all times of the day.

When Roman reached the point on the street where he could look up and see the prisoners, he turned his eyes away from them toward the ground. Never, never would he look up at them. It wasn't cruelty within Roman that propelled him to reject the prisoners so severely, but the injustice that the prisoners' living conditions were even better than those for most people, imagine: soup and three hot meals a day, free TV and medical care. Those damned prisoners who killed and raped received from the state better food and care than hard working citizens.

Of course, with his apprentice salary Roman could now provide a decent meal for himself and his mother. But this had not always been the case. On one particular afternoon, three years ago, Roman lost all sympathy for prisoners. It was not the afternoon his father died, but this incident should be explained.

Roman's father, known as Pan Piani (Mr. Drunkard), was working as a cement mixer for the town's construction company. His footprints were imbedded in many of the sidewalks in town, not because he consciously discovered a way to leave his mark on this world, but

because he did not feel any pride for his work and he would just lay sidewalks while tending to his drinking habit. He swayed instead of walked, slurred when he spoke and screamed at his wife and son until he passed out in a deep snore every night. He drank almost all of his meager salary (about two hundred dollars a month) away and never listened to one cry from Roman's mother that she couldn't put decent meals on the table.

Everyone in town knew Roman's father was a drunk; he often was spotted passed out on a curb, with his soiled socks dangling off his feet or his zipper down. Then one day three years ago, in late March when the frozen pond started to thaw, Roman's father decided to cross the pond by foot. Why he decided he had to do this, no one could conclude. In the middle of the pond he fell through the ice up to his neck. He was drunk as a skunk and so the cold water did not affect him for some time. But he could not pull himself out. This scene looked rather comical for the first twenty minutes, and over fifty people gathered around and stood at the edge of the pond screaming out to him. Located too far in the middle of the pond for someone to cast him even a tree branch or a rope, Pan Piani stood in water almost up to his neck, mumbling inaudibly. After about an hour, his head finally dipped under the ice. The crowd broke out in shrieks, then fell silent in terror at the scene of the drowning man. Six weeks later, when the ice melted, two firemen in a small boat rowed out to the lake, untangled his body from a bunch of vines and rowed it ashore. Roman, his mother and the priest were there to see the corps straight into a casket and to the graveyard.

The death of Pan Piani did not grant his wife liberation. Even though she was freed from his useless and draining presence, verbal lashes, physical beatings and threatening demands, she soon learned that she inherited numerous debts at most bars in town, including the Devil's Inn. Roman's mother never once in her life ate dinner or drank one drink at the Devil's Inn. Now, she had to somehow find the money to pay for her useless husband's frolicking adventures there.

Although his father was an embarrassing drunk, so were many fathers in town and, up until the moment of his death, Roman actually lived a fairly carefree life. He enjoyed a kind of indifference toward the future that didn't carry too many promises but never threatened his state of being either. But after his father's death, he had to sober up his own act, financially take care of his mother and be the man of the household. With the money given to them by the state, and a job Roman found cleaning the underground public bathrooms near the castle, Roman and his mother barely had enough money to feed themselves, as most of it went to paying off the father's debts.

Last Christmas Eve his mother surprised Roman with a special dinner. She had received a piece of the most expensive kielbasa from the butcher as a kind gift. Excited to eat the meat with her son, she set a special table and prepared all day some fat bits and onion strips to pour over it. The dinner even brought on a special prayer to the Virgin Mary. But just as Roman was seated at the table with his best shirt on, and she was cutting the piece of meat into two equal portions, their dog came out of nowhere and thrust his front paws onto the table. He grabbed the piece of kielbasa in his mouth and ran away.

Roman's mom shrieked in horror. She chased the dog across the room and grabbed onto his jaws. Growling, with saliva dripping out of its mouth, the dog fought fiercely to swallow the meat. Roman's mother filled up with so much rage that she pried the dog's jaws open and stretched her hand deep into its throat to reclaim the kielbasa. She washed off the gnawed meat and placed it back on to the table. She sprinkled fat bits and onion slices over it, and started once again to cut it in half trying to pretend the whole scene had not occurred. But giving Roman his portion and looking into his eyes, she suddenly broke out in sniffing tears and wailing apologies that lasted throughout the meal, "I am so sorry, my dear child! I am so sorry, my dear child!"

Not knowing how to react to the scene that just took place, or the sorrow in his mother's voice, Roman sat quietly and rapidly chewed the kielbasa. But each time he swallowed, he filled up with more and more contempt for the injustices of the world that made his mother resort to such a desperate act in order to feed her son a meager piece of meat. Roman kicked the dog out of the house that same evening, and never felt a bit of sympathy when it cried outside the door all through the night, begging to come in. After a month the dog disappeared.

So hearing about how the prisoners received three hot meals every day, including a piece of meat and soup, he despised them for receiving what rightfully belonged to honest, hard working people.

Roman climbed up the stairs to Dorota's apartment and knocked at the door twice. She opened the front door and he took a hungry look at her, examining her flirtatiously from top to toe. "Ah, you look like a million dollars, as always."

"Thank you," she bashfully replied, even though Roman always used the same line.

Roman slipped into her apartment as she promptly locked the door behind him. The apartment was small; Dorota had decorated the place with meticulous attention. In the narrow, rectangular living room she squeezed in a purple and black plush sleeper couch and matching chair, a wardrobe with glassed shelves that held over twenty crystal trinkets and eight shot glasses, a good sized TV, a coffee table, a poster of the seaside at Gdansk and a gold-rimmed mirror. This was all that could fit in this room, and Dorota was proud of how she creatively used the space.

Her 5-year old daughter sat on the couch watching the Polish-dubbed cartoon network TV. Dorota ordered her to go and play in her room for half an hour while she tended to the man delivering gas for their stove. As the girl walked to her bedroom Roman took out the pint of beer from his coat and opened it with his shiny Zywiec bottle opener attached to his key chain. The bottle opener arrived at Andrzej Design Studio as a gift to Andrzej for his work on a prior billboard ad. But Roman received the mail and since he spent more time than Andrzej on the billboard he rightfully kept the bottle opener for himself. Roman took out a cigarette from his coat for the two of them to share. Dorota rubbed up close to him on the couch as he took a long gulp of the beer, then passed it to her to sip. With his hand free he grabbed her soft breasts and squeezed them good. She sighed softly

in his ear, as he kissed her white neck.

“Did you see the new billboard at the shoe boutique?” he asked her.

“I knew it was your design when I saw it hanging there,” she answered.

“Yes, another design that Andrzej stole from me and put his name on.”

“You have to take action,” exclaimed Dorota, “You can’t just keep letting him get away with it.”

“In time, proper time, I will take what action should be taken,” Roman sighed as he wrapped his arms around this voluptuous blond and quickly worked to line up his waist with hers.

CHAPTER 5

Roman just did not understand what it meant to run a business, what it meant to have responsibilities, or deal professionally with life’s vagaries. Of course he tried his best. But he was slow in everything he did and avoided work like a leach. Roman would always remain Roman, never rising above his mediocre life. His thoughts would never transcend the lazy fantasies of a hormone-driven child. But perhaps there was no need to rid such souls of their unconscious acts of conformity. Not everyone is destined to stand out as a thinker, an artist. He is someone who just has to be tolerated in life. But how hard it was sometimes for Andrzej to listen to the dull (and always cliché) ideas that fell out of Roman’s mouth, even in front of his most prominent clients.

Andrzej looked down at his drawing of Ela and realized how much he wanted her to be physically present, posing for him so that he can study the fine details of her face. He thought of her modest but shrewd expressions, and of course her seductive smile. A few times the image of her in his mind became as vivid as if she were standing before him. His pencil touched the paper again at a moment of upwelling inspiration, but his gesture was futile and his creativity paralyzed. It seemed impossible without her physical presence to grasp the subtleties of texture that shadow and light created upon the contours of her skin.

"Hell, I need a coffee to start my mind up. What’s taking him? I bet Roman went to that cheap girl of his,” thought Andrzej as he swelled with anger. “What’s simpler than to go buy a bag of coffee downstairs? I should've gone myself, damnit.”

He stood up and looked out of the window to the mid-day rush on the market square. No sign of Roman. At eye-level he could see across the square to a colorful row of shops. It was no wonder that he directed his gaze this way, since many of the shop signs swaying back and forth in the wind were of his design. He found aesthetic pleasure looking at his designs, and was proud to see his newest sign hanging over the shoe boutique. What a great selection of colors for the logo, and use of negative space in the center. A few of the

shops in town were adopting a new style to appeal to the new group of consumers, showing models walking through the streets of New York City or smiling off their cherry red lips on a Parisian balcony, or wearing leather shoes from Milan. Children on posters smiled at the breakfast table eating their *Danone* yogurt.

Andrzej commended the town for repainting the facades of the market square according to the traditional German style. However, he retained little hope for the town's people as a whole. Just look at the overriding fashion of the crowd: wide lapels and embroidered collars, cheap suits in the most dreadful colors, fat calves covered in thick opaque stockings, feet shoved into plastic high heels. The thinking of this town will probably never change. Instead, they will become the sacrificial lambs of progress, Andrzej thought, and he suddenly recalled how distinct Ela looked in the bar. He wondered if she would show the tender femininity of her hidden parts to him, the wonderful nude of divine creation, the ambrosia of mankind. He suddenly found joy in a fantasy of imposing his powers over her. He was curious how liberated she really was, and how far she would go in taking on poses according to his direction.

Andrzej never married and he would never marry, as he loved his solitude. He could not live without the unrestrained wanderings of his thoughts and he didn't care for most people's presence. He hated having to watch his words and always having to take into account the sensitivity of people's traditional minds. They would never tell you what was really on their minds, but they were sure to talk about you behind your back. On the one hand, he didn't want to know what people were thinking because he didn't want to be bothered by their useless small talk. On the other hand, he enjoyed how easily he could adjust to people's predictable expectations in both speech and action. It was entertaining to converse with people and guess their next remarks. He remembered the same kind of common phrases while learning French, but they at least sounded exotic with a chic sense of style.

Ah, but Ela seemed to possess an elevated eloquence in her words, a more refined touch to her soul. The sharp focus of her pupils seemed to radiate deep concentration and attention for every word he spoke to her. "What was her impression of me?" suddenly this question arose in him. He hadn't been worrying about her feelings for him up until now. "She must like me of course, she talked with me all evening... why worry about it?" He rhetorically answered his own doubts. But you never know with women. Sometimes you're convinced that they feel the same intimate and flirtatious tension, but at the moment you bend over to kiss them, they tell you with a face as surprised as a fire alarm that it never crossed their minds you were considering them in *that* way and they thought you were just good friends. Andrzej knew that women never give away their true feelings until you embarrassed yourself. Sometimes you just had to push a little further, overwhelm them, convince them by sweet words or compulsion, but they always like to play games and see a little humiliation.

Agnieszka, his old friend, was something else. She was one of the few women if not the only woman, whom Andrzej could really respect in this town. She always straight out told you what she wanted, even when sexual acts were involved. Andrzej remembered he

had some pictures of her. He stuck his hand in his drawer and pulled out his own private collection of photographs.

Some were black and white pictures of a painter from Lodz, Katarzyna. She was advanced enough in her philosophies that, even though she was married, she allowed Andrzej to photograph her fine figure for projects in his work. Her breasts produced spectacular shadows of hooks, an image too good not to expose. A few pictures of Biata were also in the drawer. Biata was Dorota's friend. Some evening at a party at Roman's, Andrzej got so drunk out of boredom and decided to amuse himself with her. She had a beautiful body but there was something nonsymmetrical and unpleasant about her face. With his camera Andrzej captured the slight curves of her hips and waste, of her firm shoulders and thin legs. He had taken some perfect shots of her standing tall with her legs spread apart and her back arched so far backward that her form ended sharply with the edge of her neck. Wasn't it Ivan Karamazov who said that humans could never love all thy neighbors as thyself because they are naturally repulsed by an ugly face? Ah! Andrzej finally found a few pictures of Agnieszka. He loved the amazing poses she would do for him.

Suddenly he heard a knock at the front door and placed the pictures back in the drawer. "Roman?" he shouted. But Roman did not answer. Andrzej stood up and walked around his desk to the doorway. He encountered an unknown visitor.

"Forgive me for walking right in. There was no one in the front room and your door was open. Is this the office of Andrzej Adamczewski?"

"Ah yes, it is. Come right in, I'm Andrzej Adamczewski. I'm sorry, I thought you were my assistant. I had sent him on an errand and was expecting him back. How can I be at your service?"

"I come from the office of Bank Razvitia, the new Lowicz branch. The executive director has seen some of your work in a few shops on the main road from Warsaw to Lodz. He sent me to ask you if you would be interested in a proposition."

"Well, it depends on what kind of proposition? Have a seat, please."

"Would you be interested, Pan Adamczewski, in designing a series of promotional materials which we can use for the opening day of our new branch? We want to create a distinct logo for our branch to, you know, distinguish it a little from our Warsaw office. The word of corruption has seeped into the papers and now some people have the impression that, well you understand. Anyway, we would like to set ourselves a little apart from the Warsaw branch and celebrate our opening."

"It sounds quite interesting, and I specialize in this type of design work. (Andrzej didn't like the smell of him, but knew he could earn a hefty sum making a logo for the bank.)

They discussed the nature of the proposition for a small twenty minutes. When his visitor got ready to leave, Andrzej was quick to hand him his newly printed business card, and assured him that he would have his assistant call his director to make an appointment. Please tell your boss that I would be delighted to meet with him and discuss his ideas further, and I could show him some examples.”

“Thank you very much for your time, he will be pleased. My boss also has been visiting the National Museum in Lodz and saw your photographs. You do capture a woman’s body quite nicely.”

“That is what I’m here for, aside from making logos and billboards of course.”

The visitor laughed and stood up to shake Andrzej’s hand. “Dziękuję i do widzenia,” he responded and received Andrzej’s business card. Andrzej led him out the door with a promise to place the interests of the man’s boss on the top of his list.

CHAPTER 6

Andrzej returned to his office and picked up his sketch of Ela. He decided to start over, changing her posture into a three-quarter position reclining on a red velvet chaise over a white silk sheet. He gave her almond eyes that were reminiscent of Modigliani's creations. The front door slammed open.

“Finally! That damned Roman with my cup of coffee.” He placed his drawings in the desk and walked to the next room muttering to himself. But instead of the clumsy sounds of Roman returning, he heard quick footsteps and a familiar, cheerful voice shouting his name.

“Andrzej darling! Do you have a kiss for me?”

“Agnieszka!” His mood changed to delight. “Agnieszka! Come here! Why have you been hiding from me?” Andrzej’s lips took the shape of a childish pucker.

“Because I’m very busy with my new job now, Andrzejku. I’m working for Mr. Golompki these days,” and she immediately turned to her side and presented her new boss. Mr. Golompki was a middle-aged man dressed in a respectable pinstriped suit. Andrzej received him with a reserved but kind handshake. He recognized Golompki from other, less favorable, dealings around town. Nevertheless he stuck to the protocol of a first meeting. Golompki was a businessman of some wealth, which he had gathered in recent years. It was not enough to stop working, but enough to build a seven-room house in the countryside. The fact that Andrzej thought “seven rooms” as soon as he recognized Golompki could be expected, as the town’s gossip circle had paraded the number to every house, office and store. Andrzej also knew about some other details of his life, details that made Golompki look pathetic just by the way he strained his back to stand erect.

Golompki did not sense Andrzej’s repulsion. He was too busy grinning at his new prize.

Meanwhile, Agnieszka made sure she remained the center of attention. She took wide steps around Andrzej's office, holding the ends of her black shawl at her shoulders.

"I don't like this one," she blurted out about his newest painting hanging on the wall.

"It is perfection!"

"It's bad. But this one! I must have this one. Give it to me Andrzejku."

"No, I can't give it to you just like that." Andrzej played with his words.

"You must! I need it for my new apartment. What do you think, Mr. Golompki? Will you buy it for me? Andrzej, what is the price?"

"It's not for sale, Aga, but you can have that one," pointing to another drawing. "How did she get money for a new apartment?" Andrzej thought. "He of course must have bought it for her."

"Blah! I don't like that one, don't you love me anymore, Andrzejku?"

Agnieszka scrutinized a smaller painting on the wall, stuck her tongue out at it, and let another one catch her interest just so she could stroll across the office waving her black shawl. She was a voluptuous woman, and Andrzej thought about how the lower edges of her butt cheeks touched in the photograph he took of her while she sat in his chair and kicked her legs up in the air.

The two men watched her rate the paintings in the office. When she exhausted herself, she moved toward one of the chairs in front of Andrzej's desk. Golompki sat down in the chair next to her. Andrzej took his place behind his desk. Agnieszka placed her elbows on the desk and pouted at Andrzej.

"Give it to me!"

"I'll give it to you!" Andrzej answered with a growl that made Golompki's head jerk.

"So what do you do for Mr. Golompki exactly?"

"I'm his secretary at the new Home for the Elderly in town. It's a wonderful place Andrzej, you must come and see it! There are over twenty elderly people living there already. Mrs. Orzechowska just moved in yesterday."

"What cover could this be? Why would Golompki open up a house for the elderly?" Andrzej pondered.

The idea of Aga being involved with this Mr. Golompki agitated Andrzej. He reminded him somewhat of a fat bird who, getting more than its fill, developed a swollen neck, breast and stomach. The way in which Golompki's short and thin legs poked out from

under his fat belly made Andrzej aware of his own superior charms. But he kept a friendly and professional smile toward Golompki. He just could not place this pigeon with Agnieszka who was so much more attractive and avant-garde than he. But this was not the first time he questioned her choice of men.

”Ah,” Andrzej had a competing thought. “Maybe Golompki has value for me as well. He must need a welcome sign and logo for his elderly home.”

“Let me offer you a glass of French brandy to celebrate our acquaintance, Pan Golompki!”

Golompki at first hesitated, claiming that they needed to get back to the office and were just passing by. But Agnieszka insisted, and so he agreed to just one shot.

Agnieszka smiled joyously and embraced her company enthusiastically, throwing a kiss on his cheek to convince him of the righteousness of his decision.

Andrzej opened a bottle of François Guy, gripped it by its neck and passed it to Golompki.

“Just smell for a moment, it’s the best there is! I still remember the first time I tasted the sweet spirit. In 1979, in Paris.”

He toasted his glass toward Agnieszka, “To your happiness and well-being, and your new job with Pan Golompki, my pretty squirrel!”

The three downed the shot while Roman sneaked back into the office. Pan Golompki stood up to avoid having to drink more shots. Andrzej stood up as well, and shook his hand over the table. “Well, Pan Golompki, it was nice meeting you, maybe we’ll do business some day. Let me know when you need a welcome sign for the elderly home.”

Andrzej walked around the table to hug and kiss Agnieszka. He led them both out the door and spotted Roman sitting in his chair smoking a Popularne, as he tried to line up the logo with the address on the Zywiec billboard. He feigned to be so concentrated on his work that he couldn't even look up to greet the departing visitors. Andrzej took this as another example of his benighted provincialism.

CHAPTER 7

Roman was just finishing the last touch on the Zywiec billboard as Andrzej entered. He turned to Roman with disdain, “Roman, did you finish the Zywiec billboard yet? I need to get it to the director by end of the day. That’s two hours from now!”

“You know, I was ready to finish it this morning, but I had to get some coffee,” Roman answered and reached for a square.

“You mean you actually use that square and still produce crooked lines? That’s amazing! And what took you one and a half hours to buy coffee?”

“I had to drop in and see my mother. She’s sick with grippe. I had to take her to the hospital.”

“Hm, I’m sorry to hear that. Please give my sympathy to her.” He reluctantly admitted and walked back into his office.

"I should’ve never hired him,” Andrzej mumbled loud enough to let himself hear the words. “Ah, let him have his cheap moments of happiness with that married tramp, it’s not going to ruin my day. Who knows, maybe his mother is really ill. God knows what she’s been forced to endure.” Andrzej’s older sister knew her well, and she was the one who begged him to give poor Roman a job to help out his mother.

The salary, which Andrzej paid Roman, was reasonable and actually too high for the work he received in return for it. But Andrzej knew it was still not adequate to support a mother with an inherited drinking debt, and often he felt himself caught between pity for the family and the need to run a good business. After all, he could not carry the burden of all of Poland’s misery and sink along with it. But Andrzej did bother with Roman, and when it really came down to it, he couldn’t explain exactly why.

“If it weren’t for his damn predicament, he would be out a long time ago. It wouldn’t be so bad if he would work hard and appear enlightened once in a while, or even if he could draw a damn straight line. But if I didn’t give him a job, he would wind up just like his father.”

CHAPTER 8

At three minutes before five Roman left the office and walked home tired and hungry. Ever since Andrzej decided to lengthen the workday to 5:00 instead of 3:00, claiming that this adjustment was necessary because Andrzej’s studio was part of the new economy, Roman suffered terrible pangs of hunger. Of course his mother packed him two cheese and cucumber sandwiches to bring to work every morning, but Roman ate them before arriving to work. Sometimes, when Andrzej sent him on an errand, he would buy a roll or two with money from the mug, justifying it by the fact that Andrzej unjustly increased his hours without asking him. Today Roman had bought beer instead of rolls and the energy he used at Dorota’s left him with a growling stomach.

The road to Roman’s apartment, where he lived with his mother, lay close to the outskirts of town near the old railway tracks. He walked the tracks for the last 400 meters thinking of how he was going to get back at Andrzej for the extra hours he had to work without a pay raise. Andrzej was working him like a dog and he wasn’t going to take it. By 5:00 the world was black. If you had no idea what time it was, you would think it were already midnight. The tracks were invisible; there was no way to avoid icy mud from puddles seeping through your socks.

Roman unlocked the door, took off his coat, slipped into his house slippers and walked five steps down the little hallway into his bedroom. His mother heard him come in and screamed from the kitchen, "Did you have a good day at work?" Roman grunted back and shut the door to his room. He picked up the magazine lying on his pillow and fell back on his bed. A Fiat Barchetta appeared before his eyes. Four cylinders, front wheel drive, a top speed of 200 kilometers per hour, and acceleration 0 to 100 kilometers per hour in 8.9 seconds. That was what you called a mean mother mating machine. What if Roman ever got himself behind the wheel of this Barchetta? He would drive up to the stop light on Kaliska Street, take a left onto the Lodz-Warsaw road, rev up the motor, wait until the exact moment when the light turned green and accelerate in 8.9 seconds up to 100 kilometers per hour. He would keep accelerating until he whizzed past towns, cutting left and right over the yellow line to pass anyone who got in his way. He would choose the blue cobalt model, with leather interior and power steering.

On Roman's desk was a drawing of a cobalt blue Barchetta parked in front of the hot night club *Loch* in Warsaw's old town. Roman had never been to this club, but he heard all the actors hung out there and one beer cost the small fortune of a twelve zloty. In his drawing the door to the driver's seat just swung open. A slender, female leg stretched out, wearing a cobalt blue stiletto heel. A big muscular bouncer stood at the threshold of the club, dressed in black. He stared at the car with a smooth grin. The caption of the advertisement read "Cobalt Blue – We've Been Waiting For You."

Roman thought of this advertisement himself. He was going to submit it to a contest advertised by Fiat. The winner's submission would be used in the spring advertisement for next year's Barchettas. Cobalt blue was a new color to be added next year.. Roman believed he could win. His drawings showed some real talent. One sketch was of a silver BMW M5 with tiny droplets of water dripping over the hood. A high-heeled model arched her back over the hood with similar droplets of water dripping down her stomach.

The caption read, "Want to Sweat?"

In another ink sketch created by Roman, Baruta looked down on the town square from one of the prison windows at a circle of high school girls playing jump rope. The variations of thickness and thinness in the lines produced great areas of detail and light. Roman tossed over in his mind how much money he could get for this one. It was better than Andrzej's Baruta, and if he was getting two hundred zloties for his from Stan, Roman could surely get three hundred! Or, he could show it at the new gallery in the library with the collection of Baruta images. One of these days he was going to bring this picture down to the library.

A third picture taped to Roman's wall was a still life in watercolors of the lake in which his father drowned. The day after the tragic incident Roman went to the lake with his watercolors and painted that picture in silence.

"Roman come, dinner's ready!"

Roman threw the magazine back onto his pillow and walked into the living room. His advertisement of the Barchetta was near completion, and on next Friday he would post it to the address listed in the contest announcement. Afterwards, for the next six weeks he would secretly daydream hour by hour about the selection committee holding up his drawing in amazement, and racing to type him a letter stating that he had won the contest and should come down to the Warsaw. There would be lots of cameras snapping his picture and the publicity would open up the door to his own design studio for car companies, computer companies and in the second week of daydreaming he decided to throw in the hottest nightclubs too.

His mother ladled hot soup into his bowl. Red borsch with dumplings was his favorite. Roman's mother always wanted to know about his work and her questions, "What projects are you working on? Did you tell Andrzej that you wanted to learn how to design yourself? Have you met any important clients?" quickly offset him.

"We're very busy now," he answered abruptly. "Many projects, Golompki was in today and Andrzej keeps pressing more work on me. We had a tight deadline to meet today."

"Golompki?"

"Yes, but I don't want to talk about work at home," and with this his mother fell silent. It pained her that her inquisitive questions about his activities at Andrzej's studio irritated him, but she knew that children simply act like this toward their parents. Beneath all her questions and prying into his working day, she beheld a gratitude for Roman. In fact, without him, she wouldn't be able to survive, and would have lost the very apartment she lived in her whole life.

As Roman and his mother were finishing up dinner, the phone rang. His mother walked into the living room and answered the phone.

"Roman, Michalek for you!" his mother called out from the living room. Popping the final chunk of a dumpling into his mouth he walked over to the telephone.

"Hey old man, let's get out. My wife is driving me crazy," Michael spoke from his own apartment, which was just across the courtyard.

"Give me five minutes and I'll meet you outside," said Roman, and he hung up the phone, went into the bathroom, relieved himself, and switched back into his shoes.

"I'm going out with Michael!"

"Don't stay out too late!" his mother worried that he was overstraining himself with the long hours at his job and then trying to keep up with his friends at night. Roman unlocked the door and left.

Outside in the dirt courtyard Michalek was waiting for him, leaning on a metal swing set, smoking a Popularne cigarette. His lanky body lacked solid muscle, his greasy blond hair was wrapped in an elastic. As long as Roman could remember Michalek wore a brown thin leather jacket and thought of himself as a Polish James Dean. “Hey Roman, how much money you got?”

“Just about one zloty, not even enough for one beer.”

“Me too. Let’s go place a bet. Double or nothing, what do you say? Do that three times and we can get us a few beers at Piszek’s. If we lose, we go to the park and harass teenage girls.”

“Sounds good either way.”

Together the two of them walked down the railroad tracks to the center of town. Just off the tracks there existed a betting room where all types of bets could be made. A soccer game between Szczecin and Lodz was just starting up, but Roman and Michalek needed a quick turnover.

“Let’s bet on the next horse race in Sluzewiec. It’s starting in five minutes.”

“Okay, put it all on number 7.”

“Are you crazy, that’s impossible, chances are one to ten, let’s take 6.”

“No, the chances don’t matter. Everybody knows they fix the races. You just have to be lucky. I’m putting mine on 7.” Roman paid the tobacco-shriveled man behind the glass window the last zloty from his pocket. A gunshot sounded through a bad speaker hanging in the corner of the tar-stained ceiling. A trample of horses raced around a track, and after a few minutes and some seconds it was precisely number 7 whom the voice from the speaker screamed was coming around the home stretch and going to win by two heads’ lengths. The bet collector didn’t like to dish out winning money. He grinded his teeth and grunted as he counted the zloty into Roman’s hand. Michalek lost his zloty, having bet on number 6.

Roman won enough money to buy them two beers each. With a slap on each other’s back they left the dirty betting room to make their way to their favorite local pub. It was a pub on the same street as the town cinema, though too far down the road to lure the cinema crowd. Roman now felt on top of the evening and all his frustrations of work dissipated into the air.

CHAPTER 9

Andrzej gave a final look at the product Roman left on his desk before picking it up to deliver it to the director of the Zywiec distribution warehouse the next morning. A closer look at the company address revealed that the word ulitsa was missing its s. Could

Roman really not know how to spell *street*? No, he was just damn careless. He could only think about getting out of the office and had no problem turning in an assignment with *ulitsa* spelled wrong. God, Andrzej had to double-check everything the damn kid did. How careless, lazy, thoughtless and stupid could he be! And he wants to take on his own projects. The industry would crush him. He would go bankrupt in a week. Andrzej grabbed a Stanley knife and with its sharp blade began to scrape *ulita* off the billboard. The glue resisted and the rubber letters slid into each other. He scraped and scraped, then reprinted the word *ulitsa*, prepared the glue and positioned it on the billboard. Almost an hour passed by before he glued the final *a* in place, Andrzej breathed freely again, with his forehead dripping in sweat and the room filled with curses.

Having missed dinner hour, he poured himself a shot of brandy and gulped it down. He opened his window to let in some fresh air. The burning tar smell was gone, as the working day for laborers had long ceased. Andrzej watched a group of teenage girls in short mini skirts hold their scarves against their faces as they pressed close together and walked briskly toward the disco bar in the castle courtyard. Just three steps behind them a group of boys in jean jackets strode in the same direction. The three drunkards Andrzej passed last night took up their position on a bench. Such was the typical heightened activity of a Friday night in this town. Aside from the teenagers and drunkards, mostly everyone else sat at home, finishing up dinner and watching a TV movie, perhaps for no other reason than there was nothing else to do.

Andrzej stared stolidly out the window, thinking about how he should be drinking wine on a French balcony, absorbing what the world had to offer in terms of passion and excitement, painting his own interpretations of human greatness and humility, rather than wasting his time creating billboards. He was better than this, even though he had his independence and established enough clientele to take in a decent income. Too great a proportion of his days was being wasted on trivial matters that, in the end, burned a hole in his stomach, an emptiness, a void which should be filled with the great paintings he was called to create on this earth.

All of a sudden, the vision of monotony outside his window transformed into life's primal quest. Ela, the Ela that had placed him on top of the world last night, stepped out of the grocery store below his very office and began to scurry across the square. Andrzej did not see her face, but recognized her from her chic hairstyle. Her neck, he hadn't noticed her swan like neck in the bar and it was unbelievably sensual. She looked like Juliet Binoche in *Red*, a fleeing Veronica carrying away the plot of his desires. His heart started racing. He had to stop her. "Eliza" he screamed out his window. She turned around and looked up at the gray haired man hanging out of a window.

"Andrzejku, is that you? What are you doing up there?"

"This is my studio. Come on in, please. Come...have a cup of coffee with me. The green door on the left," Andrzej pointed to show her the way.

Eliza entered with her head covered in a fox hat and her nose frosted from the cold.

Andrzej kissed her on both cheeks and hugged her as if she were a long lost friend. She allowed him to take her coat and hat off while she stared intriguingly at his paintings and drawings on the walls. He poured her a cup of black coffee. Her presence elevated his soul. He was his favorite self again in front of her: dashing, artistic, humorous, intellectual and prowling. She, the diamond in a coalmine, smiled at him with red lips and moved her arms in ways that belonged to the silver screen. She consumed him in her deep dark eyes and understood his sufferings. She awoke his spirit of philosophy, emanated blue with heavenly magic, red with passion, and white with divine illumination.

“You saved me, Eliza. I was afraid you disappeared from my life and my soul was getting ready to cross the river Styx. Charion’s mouth was open, my hand stretching out to render him his payment, but then you appeared! My soul is reborn!”

“Oh Andrzej, you are too much!” she smiled in a way that allowed her to accept the complement. “It’s a bit stuffy up here. You need to get out more!”

“I only venture out when there is beauty to be seen. When there is no beauty out there, I might as well stay inside.”

“Come, let’s go. I just checked the movie schedule for the cinema. They’re playing *A Short Story About Love* tonight.”

“Then I must accompany you.”

“That’s a wonderful idea. The show starts at eight o’clock. But I must first return to my aunt’s apartment and drop off some bread and kielbasa. Come with me. She said she knows you, and that I should be careful because you’ve seduced many women in this town.”

“But I promise to be no harm to you, my little child,” and with this he licked his lips and growled the playful roar of a lion. Andrzej closed up the studio and the two walked across the square hand in hand like children.

CHAPTER 10

Roman and Michael strode into Piszek’s Pub, a skewed, stuffy room painted in blood red and decorated with black plastic tables and chairs. Piszek was known for selling cheap beer, warm cheap beer that is, or at least for most of the year. Only in the winter did he sell cold beer. He didn’t own refrigeration and the temperature of the beer was completely dependent on the weather. His clientele however was not the type to consider this a problem. The cheap price for beer, he sold it for only two zloty, and a place to sit away from home were all that mattered. Two older men sat at a table toward the back wall drinking beer, smoking cigarettes, coughing up phlegm and playing chess. Piszek, smoking behind the counter as always and squeezing his eyes at every suck of his cigarette, greeted Roman and Michael without a word about the fifty zloty Roman owed

him for his father's debt. Piszek felt sorry for Roman and a tinge of guilt for allowing his father to accumulate a debt, which now rested on his young shoulders. Besides, he had liked his father deep down and missed shooting the breeze with him on Sunday afternoons when no other ragged soul could escape from home.

Roman, in turn, had overcome his hesitation to enter Piszek's pub because, hell, it didn't matter which bar he would visit; it was the same everywhere. He and Michael claimed the empty table by the window. Michalek sighed and invoked a trifle conversation.

"So how's Dorota's tits holding up? You still visit her, don't you?"

"You know Michalek, I was thinking the other day that women are like lonely caterpillars dying to crawl all over you. And if you pay just a little bit of attention to them, make them feel like beautiful and light butterflies, they adore you. They'll do anything for you."

"What'll it be? We will drink to the beautiful women in this God forsaken town and our winning score tonight."

"Zywiec of course."

Roman walked to the bar and bought two cans of Zywiec beer from Piszek, opened them and returned to the table.

"To beautiful women who will do anything for us," toasted Michalek. "But you know the problem. Once they suck their teeth into you, they don't let go. They turn into creatures much uglier than the innocent caterpillar, queen bees are a close fit, and make you work from morning 'till night. When you come home all they do is buzz in your ear and nag, nag, nag that there's no money. Last week I surprised my wife and bought this new imported white vegetable I saw at the market on my way home. It looked quite interesting, so I bought it for her as a surprise, a gift. She screamed at me because the vegetable was too large and too white. Could you believe that? Too large and too white. She accused the thing of being a fake. Then she accused me of lacking common sense and blowing my money. You see, you can't please women no matter what you do!"

"But Michalek!" Roman said on his way up to the bar, "You made the mistake of getting married. Once you're married, you're dead."

"If you die and go to hell do you hear a woman nagging for all eternity? If not, sign me up! Hey, listen to this. You know how Woytek and Beata were engaged and all ready to get married right? Well, about two weekends ago he was in Warsaw visiting his cousin. He met a girl who works at some fashion boutique that just opened up. He fell in love with her instantly. The girl, I think Kasia is her name, gave him an apartment in Warsaw to stay, and she also gave him a job designing advertisements for the *Warsaw Gazette*. I guess her father is part owner of the paper. Woytek came back to Beata after the first weekend of hooking up with Kasia, but didn't say anything. He just waited until she went

to work on Monday, then packed all his stuff and snuck out before she came home. He even took the computer that they bought together, and stuck her with the bill!”

“Man, that’s a tough one. An apartment in Warsaw?”

“Yeah, I heard that Kasia girl owns it. That she’s loaded. He isn’t even paying rent! Beata’s pregnant too. But Woytek claims it isn’t his, and that’s why he left, because he didn’t want to look into the eyes of a baby that wasn’t his. Beata insists that it’s his and she threatened to leave the child on his doorstep if he doesn’t come back. But he isn’t coming back. No way.”

“Man, an apartment in Warsaw, really?”

”Smack in the old town. He invited me up there. Wanna go? But Beata can’t find out. I just want to see if he’s really telling the truth.”

“How the hell will we get to Warsaw?”

“Woytek said we don’t have to worry about money once we get there. We have to find someone that can give us a ride. Don’t you know anyone going to Warsaw?”

“I’ll think about it. It’s damn tempting. Man, it sounds like Woytek got damn lucky. Where can I find a sugar lady to get me an apartment in Warsaw? Tough luck for Beata, though. There’s no way she can compete with that. No way. He’d have to be crazy to come back and leave an apartment and job in Warsaw.”

“She’s a wreck, goes to his parents and screams at them, but there is nothing they can do. Besides, they’re probably happy for him, don’t you think?”

“I don’t know, man, that’s a tough one.”

Hey, how’s work going? Andrzej still being a prick?”

“*Kurva!* He doesn’t show the least of respect for all the work I do. And you should’ve seen how he kissed ass to Golompki today. I walked in when I overheard them talking. Golompki was with that woman Agnieszka. You should have heard him getting all friendly with that corrupt vulture. That’s how he does business I tell you! He’ll kiss anyone’s ass to receive a new work order.”

“Hey, speak of the devil. Isn’t that Andrzej walking across the street? But who’s that girl next to him? Do you know her? She seems damn young to be holding his dirty hand. Um mmm, a fine tight ass!”

“Must be his new prey. Who knows, maybe she has a thing for old men. I’ve never seen her before.”

“Me neither. But now that I think of it, he spent last night in his office. He must of had a late night with her.”

“Are you serious? Is she stupid or what? He’s going younger and younger. Next thing you know he’ll be hanging out in front of the kindergarten. Man, I can think of a few ways to get on her. It wouldn’t be hard. She doesn’t seem like she’d give much of a fight.”

“Hey, there’s that dumb Ivan.” Roman recognized him coming out of the cinema with a broom in his hand. “They really let him out of the ward! They say he’s cured enough to be around normal people. Slower than a virgin but safe for social interaction. He’s sweeping the stairs. The state must have gotten him a job.”

“Wow, I remember in first grade when they declared him retarded. They stuck him in the ward for, uh, about fifteen years. Now he’s got a job sweeping stairs. He probably gets better paid than we do!”

“Anyway, you finally ready for your second beer?” Roman asked Michalek after emptying his glass in one last gulp.

CHAPTER 11

Andrzej was in ecstasy walking next to divine Ela. She too felt comfortable being with him. She felt entrusted around him and sympathetic enough to feel flattered by his advances. They walked hand in hand to the cinema without a care in the world about all the gossiping eyes watching them. He squeezed her hand every few minutes and she cuddled up closer to his arm to create a warmth between them that combated the wintry air. Ela daringly challenged Andrzej’s ideas on Kieslowski , and he loved her for this. How long had it been since he could ponder the philosophy of the great artist with someone who understood, and even further, pressed him to think deeper.

Ela put forward the idea that *A Short Story About Love* was a tragedy of “human yearning for the highest form of love” modeled after the greatest of the Greek tragedies Zbigniew Preisner’s operatic, mournful music, playing at key moments in the film, interjected a meditative. She argued that this quest for ideal love occupied the main stage of the film while ‘knowing’ that served the function of the chorus in early Greek tragedy. That is, the music resonated an omniscience that proclaimed man’s base, animalistic and terribly tragic nature, which stood in opposition to his quest for an elevated ideal. Entangled in these and other thoughts concerning the structure of Kieslowski ’s film, Ela and Andrzej walked past Pizsek’s Pub without noticing Roman and Michalek staring up at them like dogs.

Andrzej and Ela turned left, ascended three cement stairs and entered the cinema house. It was an old cinema that did not possess an adequate budget to show new releases. It managed to keep afloat by running, from time to time, a director festival like the one it was doing now on Kieslowski . The cinema never attracted a crowd over twenty people,

probably because all Poles have seen these films on TV already and very few would actually pay money to see them in a decrepit cinema that lacked sufficient heating and comfortable seats. Andrzej had frequented this cinema since he was a child, and still saw popcorn in the speckles of the worn-down blue rug on the floor.

CHAPTER 12

Andrzej walked up to the cashier and bought two tickets for *A Short Story About Love*. As he scooped up his change from a tin bowl on the counter, Eliza pulled on his shoulder.

“Andrzej, you see that guy?”

“Where?”

“Holding the broom. He gives me the creeps. He reminds me of the portrait of the boy with wild hair and blank eyes. You remember that one?”

“Of course. Ivan isn’t wild though, don’t worry. He’s just retarded. The poor kid was stuck in one of those wards that locked up the crippled with the psychotic and paranoid schizophrenics all in one room. It was the communists’ way of getting rid of all of society’s mistakes. He’s worse now than he was ten years ago. Poor guy. But they finally let him out.”

“I saw him on the street yesterday. He tried to touch me.”

“Could you blame him? He probably hasn’t seen such beauty in all his life. The boy must know a diamond when he sees one. I just hope his eyes didn’t burn from the sight of your radiance. You know, all men would like to touch you when they see you, to see if you’re real. But they hold back because they’ve been programmed by society to do so. Ivan never was taught any social restraint, he acts purely on his impulses, but you shouldn’t worry, he’s a child. He doesn’t mean any harm. Maybe we all should be more like that?” Andrzej grabbed Ela’s waste.

“But he tried to grab my neck!” Ela brushed off Andrzej’s playful flirtation to keep to the serious subject. “I screamed and he ran away into an alley.”

“So the poor boy encounters divine beauty in this world and, when he tries to grab hold of it, it lashes at him with utter rejection. Oh, the greatest pains of this world might have been kept from him if he stayed inside the ward. Maybe he would have been better off.”

“Andrzej! I’m being serious!”

He grabbed her hand. “I am sorry. Don’t worry about it, he was probably more scared of you than you of him when you screamed. Come, let’s go into the theater.”

Ivan did not overhear the conversation, but he recognized the beautiful girl who shrieked at him when he had reached out to her on the street. He watched as she held hands with a gray-haired man and walked into the movie theatre. He then panted and sweated profusely as he swept all the dirt on the cinema floor out into the street. The speckled rug confused him, because white dots looked like dirt and at times he could not decipher which was which. He swept out all he could and told his supervisor he was done for the evening and was leaving now. Then he ran back in to make sure Ela was still in there, and waited, against the wall, for her to come back out.

Andrzej had seen this film at least ten times and didn't anticipate *really* watching it again, but Ela stared so intently at the screen that he had no chance of kissing with her. He concentrated this time on the young boy Tomek in the film who peeped with a telescope at his older, female neighbor. Why did Tomek watch his neighbor in her bedroom, when, in the end, he would declare his love for her but insist that he did not want anything from her? He obviously yearned for her, so much that he altered his life just to be closer to her. The woman was a bit of a whore, sleeping with a man she didn't really love. But she also appeared tragic, broken and jaded by unfortunate experiences. Why was Tomek obsessed with her?

When Preisner's music rang out in the film Andrzej sensed the contradiction of the striving for an ideal against man's base nature. Ela is right, he thought, this conflict is present in the film. But why does Tomek so desperately want to love this woman? What ideal love can she represent for him?

Then a new idea came to Andrzej. What if Tomek loves the woman not as a man loves a woman, but as a son loves his mother? He declares that he loves her, but wants nothing from her. He only wants to be near her. Early in the movie it is revealed that he is an orphan. Andrzej never paid attention to this detail before, but now it makes sense. Tomek watches his neighbor being taken by a man and tries to interrupt and stop the action. He does not want to make love to her himself, although he watches her. When he finally meets her, and declares his love, she takes this in the wrong way and places his hand between her legs. He shrieks in terror, orgasms in perversity and runs out the door. With his ideal shattered, he tries to kill himself.

Andrzej could sense his ideas were inchoate but provoking. It would explain Tomek's innocent love and confession-like responses in front of the woman. The perversion of a son's love, of not allowing such pure love to exist, brings about the death of his fascination for her. The movie ended and Andrzej, charged with ripe thoughts, looked at Ela whose beauty surely deserved to be captured on a canvas. Hand and hand they walked out of the theatre and onto the dimly lit street. They walked past Pizsek's Pub, which was now empty, and headed toward the market square.

Ela burst out, "I noticed this time that there is a lot of switching of roles in the film, yet, I can't yet make out why. If you think about it, Tomek was actually a replacement of another boy who used to peep at the woman. Tomek replaces a milkman, and in turn is replaced by another milkman who delivers milk to the woman's door. He also replaces

the woman's lover at the end of the film. The woman and Tomek change roles from pursuer to the one being pursued. Do you think all this is coincidence?"

"Nothing in Kieslowski's films is coincidence."

"Yes, I agree. He is one of those directors who is in complete control of his material." Ela suddenly stopped short and pulled Andrzej closer to her. "Did you hear that? It sounded as if someone stepped on something."

"What, my little dove? Perhaps a falling branch?"

"I don't know, exactly. Perhaps feel is a better word. I feel as though we are being watched."

"Don't be silly. You just got spooked by the movie. Yes, everyman in this town would like to turn a telescope on you, but I can assure you no one has one. A camera perhaps...or a shot glass."

"I'm serious!" She turned around quickly, but saw nothing in the shadows of the road.

"Didn't you hear footsteps? Don't you feel the presence of someone?"

Andrzej tried to calm her down by wrapping her scarf closer to her neck and discussing an elusive figure in the film. "Do you remember the blond-haired man standing in the courtyard of the apartment complex with a long, triangular face? He appears in many of Kieslowski's films for just a brief moment. And he always appears at the pivotal moment when a central character is about to act upon a desire, and the action, going against the moral consciousness of the character, ultimately leads to tragic consequences. This man with the triangular face looks at the protagonist with pitiful eyes full of regret. He sees the inevitable, and observes it in silence, for he is impotent in that he cannot change the course of fate." With this Andrzej looked deep into Ela's eyes and whispered, "I've seen that man in my own life as well Ela, staring at me with the same look of regret. A regret so deep, that I could feel it. I am afraid now, afraid that I am too late and the angel of salvation has passed over me."

"It hasn't, Andrzej. The angel of salvation never deserts us. But we must grasp onto its wings by our own will."

Her words incited a new hope in him. He wanted to kiss her but held back. Instead, he placed his hand gently around her neck and pulled her head close to his chest. She hugged him and he thanked her for existing. "We are eternal friends, I know it already," she whispered. He'd rather she said 'lovers' but 'friends' deeply moved him nevertheless.

They walked through the icy air creating tiny white clouds with their warm breath. Many of the prisoners' windows were still glowing, and against the blackness of night the orange glow actually created an esthetic beauty, as if their waiting for salvation took the

form of votive candles, burning religiously throughout the night. Andrzej escorted Ela through dark alleys and up the stairs of her aunt's apartment building, hoping Ela would be overcome with desire for him. He could invite her to his studio. "Ela, it's early. Would you like to come to my studio for some coffee? I have so many more impressions of the film that I need to share with you. It's so rare that I get to indulge in such inspiring conversation."

"Thank you, but I must go in. I know my aunt is waiting. I do not want her to have to stay up any longer." Andrzej heard a hint of regret in her voice.

"Not just one cup of coffee? Then tomorrow night, shall I escort you to the next movie?"

"Yes, tomorrow night would be great! They are playing "White." It starts at eight o'clock. That one is my favorite."

"But you will need to tell your aunt not to expect you so early. I will be filled with impressions of that film too, and if it is your favorite, you must be my teacher and tell me what the prophet is really trying to convey. I would like to take you..."

They entered the apartment block and walked up the stair landing to the second floor. They reached the door of her aunt's apartment and Andrzej lifted up her hand. "I would like to take you to Paris someday." He placed her hand over his right cheek and looked into her young, ambitious eyes. "Thank you for a wonderful evening."

"It was my pleasure," she answered, and slipped into the apartment before his lips could find hers.

He walked down the hallway stairs again alone, and at the threshold of the building bumped into poor Ivan trying to get into the main door. Andrzej opened the door for him, and stopped him for a second. "Ivan, Ivan, where are you going? I didn't know you lived here too?" Andrzej asked. Ivan quietly nodded and extended a polite "Good evening." Andrzej caught by surprise let him pass and walked out into night's solitude. He thought of Ela and decided to once again spend the night in his studio. He had enough rum left at his office to lull himself into a dreamy sleep.

CHAPTER 13

A knock on the door at nine o'clock a.m. startled Andrzej. He crawled back into a straight position in his chair, ran his hands through his hair and screamed "Enter." But no one entered. "Damn, Roman," he thought, "That has to be him late for work. But wait a minute, it's Saturday morning." Hard bangs came again. "Wait a minute," Andrzej screamed as he buttoned up his shirt and walked to the door. He opened it.

"Good morning, Pan Andrzej Adamczewski," two policemen with tall boots and green uniforms greeted him and walked into his studio, looking at everything in the room. Andrzej's hatred for the police immediately surfaced in him. "Long night in the studio,

eh?” They picked up the mugs on his table left by Aga and Golompki, smelled them, put them back down, looked into the empty mug where he kept the change, smelled that too, looked into the drawer and pulled out his pile of pictures. Andrzej grabbed the stack of pictures from the man’s hands and screamed, “What the hell are you doing?”

“We’re here to investigate a murder.”

“Murder!”

“Yes. Elzbieta Zemkowska, niece of Halina Zemkowska, was murdered last night in the hallway of her aunt’s apartment building at approximately twenty-three hundred hours. And you were the last person to be seen with her, we were told.”

An impulse pricked Andrzej to run to the window. Fast moving clouds moved over the sun and darken the earth. He wanted to see Ela skipping across the market square and negate what these pigs just declared. From a crack in the window a draft of bitter coldness snuck in and passed over his soul.

One of the policemen grabbed Andrzej’s hands and looked under his nails. Andrzej’s face turned white. His stomach convulsed. His throat tightened. Death for a moment tried to take him too. He assumed Ivan lived in the same building. How stupid! It would have been too much of a coincidence. What was he thinking? He was only thinking of Ela at that moment, how Ela promised to come to his studio the next evening.

As the police continued walking around, picking up and dropping down objects, Andrzej whispered to them in a voice barely strong enough to be heard, “Ivan. Go and see dumb Ivan. As I left her home, I bumped into Ivan. I didn’t think anything of it and assumed he lived there. But he must have followed us in and ...oh my God it cannot be!” He fell back into his chair and stared forward. His ink drawing of a woman hanging on the cross entered his vision. He stared at the black curves of her body, at her head tilted in despair, at the white background engulfing her. He stared until his eyes dilated and his ears blocked out the ringing voices of the policemen. One of the policemen’s lights flashed over the crucified mother and Andrzej descended into a dizzy spin; he saw only orange.