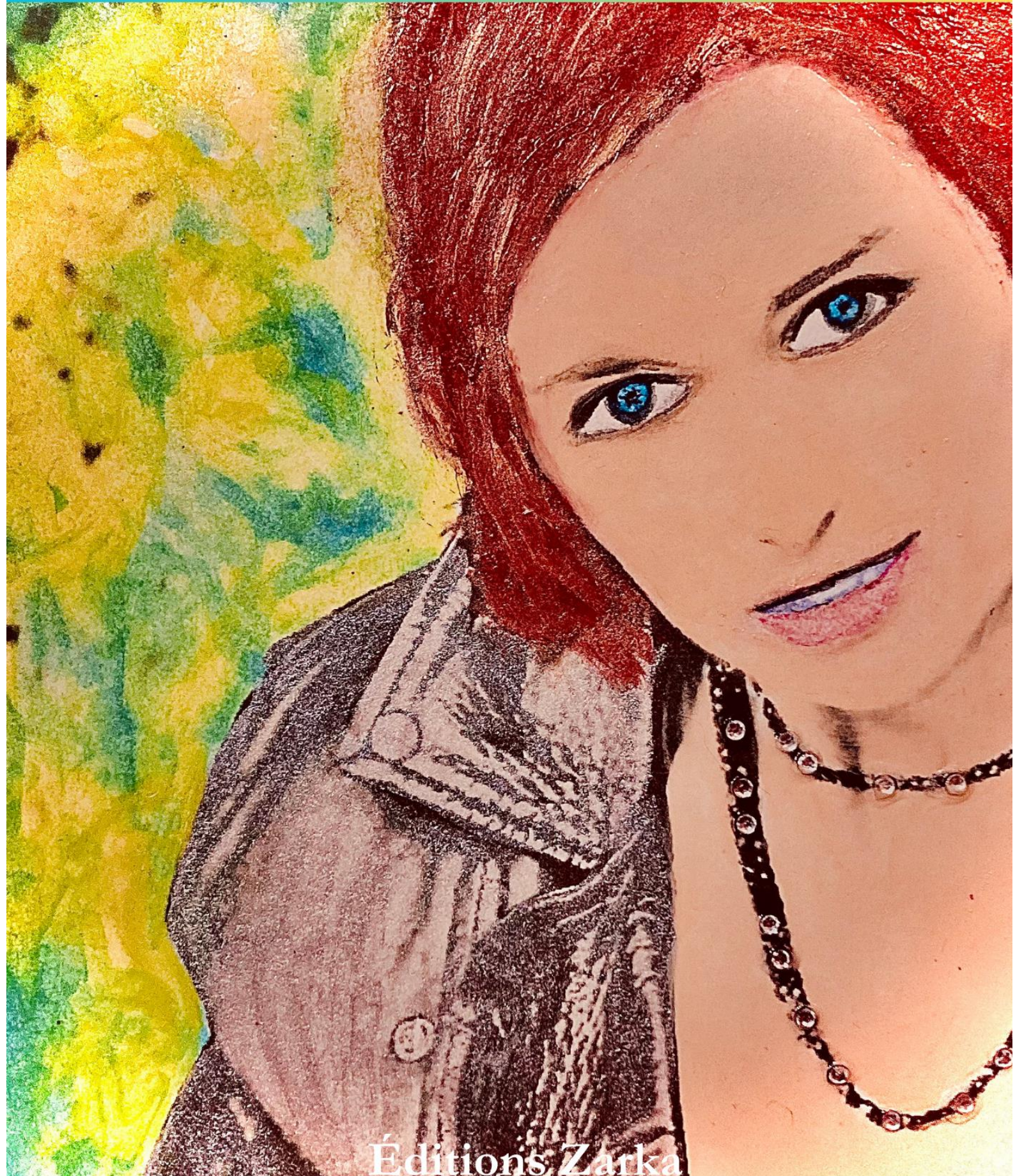


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# A Poisoned Gift



Éditions Zarka



## A never-ending Sunday

I wake up with a strange feeling of *déjà-vu*, or *déjà-vécu*, even if there's no such word. The noise of the traffic outside is muffled. Normally there's nothing to hear apart from birdsong, which is quieter in winter than in summer, but always present. I hear a train going by. Probably a freight train, as it doesn't stop. Funny thought. I'm too far from the station to hear trains! Something's wrong.

I open my eyes a bit.

This is a strange room. I know this room. It's not the first time I've woken up in it. But I shouldn't be here. It's narrow. How narrow? Two metres by four, maybe. And I wake up in a bed that's... big. It looks big to me, even though it's clearly a single bed. I haven't shrunk, have I? So, what's going on?

What's going on??? This can't be happening. I know this room. Why does it seem so strange? My eyes are wide open now and I sit up in bed. I look around and see white walls, all white, there's really nothing on them. There's this bed, I suppose it's two metres by ninety centimetres, a single bed... But I've got plenty of room. Why do I have so much space in this little bed? And then I see a big window in front of me, the whole width of the room, even if it's not very wide.

But it seems quite big to me, narrow, but big. But I don't know. All I know for sure is that last night, when I went to bed, it wasn't in this room. So, what's the problem? I take my hands out from under the duvet. I look at them: they're small. No, they're big. But they're smaller than usual: all thin, with short nails. And what's with these pyjamas? I'm wearing long-sleeved flannel pyjamas! Under the blanket, I can feel the bottoms reaching my ankles! In short, full pyjamas... and pink! Light pink, pale pink and a bit of white. Pink! I never wear pink! It's not my colour. Green and red, those are my colours! Blue and purple work too. But not pink!

And then there are these blinds, in place of last night's heavy green velvet curtains. No curtains, not even net curtains, on this window. The blinds are not completely closed, the slats let the daylight in generously. I get out of bed, approach the window and look out: I see the Place de la Gare. The station square in Bienne! What's the station square doing there? Well, the question is, what am I doing here? In Bienne! OK, I live in Bienne, but I wasn't there last night! No, no, that's not possible! There's something really wrong here. I look at myself, there's no mirror here, but I can see that my hands are quite small, I look at my feet, very thin, big, yes, but quite smaller. And I'm skinny, as usual. No, I'm usually slim, but here, instead of my lovely long, slender, muscular legs, I see two long, skinny sticks. Yesterday I was slim, this morning I can see that I'm the thin little skeleton of my childhood, in pink pyjamas that are a little too large for my slender body.

My head spins a little. This white room, with nothing on the walls. The bed by the door on one side, a table and chair under the window on the other, a wardrobe built into the wall, two suitcases and a couple of cardboard boxes on the linoleum floor. The station square in Bienne behind the window.

Last night I went to bed in a room of very similar dimensions, in a single bed that was smaller than the one in front of me, more of a bench than a bed in fact, so as not to clutter up the room too much when nobody's sleeping in it, my mother's spare room that doubles as her office, in Fribourg, with a view over a magnificent garden, albeit one that had fallen asleep at the beginning of December. There were lots of colours on the walls, including a pretty painting in shades of green by a neighbour-friend, two posters from my autumn photography exhibition, and photos of the Polish countryside where my mother has her summer house. A magnificent fern dripping from the top of the cupboard. A shelf crammed with books that my little brother hasn't yet taken with him to the small flat he and his girlfriend have rented, for lack of space.

This morning, I see Bienne station square, I know that's where I am, but how can it be? I recognise the neo-classical façade of the station; I recognise that awful set of statues of skinny men that have always been there. It's almost like Giacometti, only not as good. I've never been able to remember the artist's name, sorry for him.

But as it happens, for me last night, the date was that of 1<sup>st</sup> December 2019 and we were celebrating our thirty-fifth birthday in Switzerland with my family. My sister Jowita with her two little children, fortunately without her stupid soon-to-be ex-husband, my younger brother Leo, twenty-six this year, born in Switzerland but still linked to Poland and our family history, his girlfriend Syrah, my mother Ela, overflowing with joy to see us all around a beautiful well-stocked table.

So, this morning, did I wake up for the second time on 2 December 1984?

Last night I was forty-four.

This morning, am I nine again?

Have I jumped back thirty-five years?

It's obviously impossible.

But what if it were true?

What a gift! A second chance! A fresh start! With the experience and knowledge of my past, I can create a new future for myself! But that's amazing! Is it?

\* \* \*

OK. Zofia, honey, calm down. First of all, I need to be certain that I'm not hallucinating. I need evidence. And that means getting out of this room first. I need to empty my bladder anyway, so I open the door. A large square entrance. The main door of the flat is on my left. On the same side, between the door of my bedroom and the main door, there's another door. I know it's my sister's bedroom. Opposite is the half-open kitchen door. Continuing clockwise, to the right: my mother's bedroom, the bathroom, the storeroom, the toilet, then, again in line with my bedroom, a living room with the door wide open.

In silence, I go to the toilet. At first I ignore the mirror, just sit on the toilet, pee, wipe and... the great moment, I get up, pull up my pyjama bottoms, flush the toilet, and finally, to wash my hands, I approach the washbasin and, this time, look in the mirror.

What I see is indeed the reflection of a young girl, with chestnut brown hair and a short bob with fringes. I'll have to fix that. I hate fringes. But the notable thing now is that my face is in the lower part of the mirror.

Last night, I brushed my teeth in front of a sink that reached below my pubic bone and my face was in the upper part of the mirror. This morning, the sink is well above my navel. Thirty-five years and at least thirty centimetres shorter. I lived for almost thirty years at a height of 1m80, but now I'm a miserable 1m50! All right, I can relax, it's a lot for a nine-year-old. I look at my face: smooth skin, no wrinkles. I smile at my reflection and my dimple appears, as it should, on the right-hand side only. What an incredible rejuvenation! After admiring my image for several long minutes, I open the door to go back out and find myself face to face with Ela.

- *Zosiu*<sup>1</sup>, what are you doing in there for so long? Get dressed and come into the kitchen to drink your cocoa, says my mother, obviously in Polish.

I can't answer. I'm paralysed. Ela! Mummy! How beautiful you are! How young you are! Last night you were well into your sixties, though still beautiful and well-groomed; this morning you're thirty-two again! Last night, you were twenty-three years older than me; this morning, I'm the older of the two, twelve years your senior. You're a young woman, a little naive and very lost in a new country, and I'm an experienced woman, hardened, sometimes cynical, very critical of our so-called Western way of life. And what's more, you're taller than me, which is funny... I know that this little monologue is happening exclusively in my head as she says:

- What's the matter with you? Why are you looking at me like that?

I realise that my eyes are wide and my mouth is open. I pull myself together. So there's my evidence: my mother's youth. I just need her to confirm the date, so I finally manage to say a few words:

- Ela, could you tell me what day it is?

Now it's her who's widening her eyes. Ah yes, I didn't start calling her by her first name until I was seventeen, after years of teenage crisis and war with her... And I probably asked my question in an unusual way for a kid. But she doesn't comment on my *Ela*. She has often asked us to call her by her first name instead of *Mum*, as she and her sister were used to doing with their own parents. So, she may be surprised, but she's glad I've started. She replies:

- Sunday.

- Yes, but what date?

- December 2nd.

- What... year? (I feel like I'm in the *Terminator*!)

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<sup>1</sup> *Zofia*, the equivalent of Sophie in French, *Zosia*, the diminutive, *Zosiu*, the vocative form in Polish. So as not to complicate the reading, I won't bother with the Polish declinations. The reader should imagine that when Zofia speaks to her mother, it is almost always in Polish.

- What do you mean, what year? 1984. Sweetheart, I know the last few months have been very confusing for both of you, but you can't have forgotten the year!

- And we arrived in Bienne last night, didn't we?

- Yes, we drove from Saint-Vit with just a pause in the Swiss Jura to see St-Ursanne, remember how pretty it was? And when we arrived in Bienne, in this flat that Osio had rented for us, he went home to Bern. And we went for a walk in the neighbourhood. Don't you remember? We found a canal leading down to the lake. But it was already dark and cold, so we hurried back. We can go for a long walk today, to see the lake. Now go and get dressed and come to the kitchen for your cocoa. I'll wake Jowus.

I'm going back to my room. Yes, I remember that walk like it was yesterday... That's how my mother always does it: you put your luggage down and without touching it, you go and explore any new place. Right away. I continued this pattern myself after I left home. That's how I once found myself taken by ambulance to the emergency room in Orbetello, Tuscany, at one o'clock in the morning, with three broken ribs after falling off a cliff in the dark because I wanted to see the sea. But that's another story ...

Now I remember very well that first contact with Bienne, the Suze canal, the bare trees, no snow. The snow will arrive in abundance in a few days' time, if I remember correctly. Some of the lake will freeze over, far enough from the shore to make ice skating possible. We didn't understand until the following winter why the people of Bienne were so excited about this frozen lake, whereas for the three of us freshly arrived Poles, a lake that freezes in winter is the least of things.

Temperatures between minus ten and minus thirty are normal in winter, even in the city, even in Warsaw. But that's not the case here, in this country that is welcoming us during this particularly *barsz* winter, as they will call it several times on the TV news. As the years went by, we too got used to these milder but more humid winters. The damp cold of two degrees in the fog of the Seeland seems to penetrate to the marrow of the bones, much more than a crisp minus twenty under blue skies and dry air. With climate change set to accelerate after 2010, winters like these will become rare in Poland too.

I'm getting dressed. One rule I must remember: no pyjamas at the breakfast table. Did she say *cocoa*? My mind thinks *coffee*, but I notice the first big change, a kind of dissociation between my little nine-year-old body and my forty-four-year-old mind. I don't feel the usual craving when I wake up. Caffeine and nicotine.

Before this morning of my second life, no one was to talk to me until I'd had a coffee and at least three cigarettes. Caffeine and nicotine first, the rest can wait. It's only after this ritual that I'm able to communicate with other humans. Before that, only my cat Angie is allowed to cuddle up on my lap while I sip the life-saving beverage.

Oh, no, no! Angie! She's not here! She stayed in the future! Of course she did. I'm beginning to realise that this new situation is going to be more difficult to manage than I first thought. When I went back to 1984, I didn't just lose Angie, I also lost friends, encounters and achievements. Will I be able to get all that back? I'll have to make a list while I still remember them clearly. Try to retrace the paths of certain encounters so that I'll be in the right place at the right time.

But first the cocoa. And breakfast. Yes, I'm hungry. I stopped eating in the morning a long, long time ago, but now I'm going to have to start all over again to feed this growing little body, which is skinny enough as it is.

\* \* \*

As I leave my room, I bump into my sister coming out of the bathroom.

- Hi Jo! (in French)

- What? (in Polish)

Damn, another problem, we didn't start speaking French to each other until a few years later. Two, I think. Besides, I'm not supposed to speak French properly yet, just a few bits and pieces, even though I already understand a lot, and so does she. I learnt quickly: in May 1985 I spoke better than my Italian and Spanish friends born in Switzerland. A few months later, I started to think in French. A little later and I refused to speak Polish for a few years, unless I was forced to.

Second problem: I called her *Jo*, pronounced in English, instead of *Jowus*, a diminutive of *Jowita*, which is pronounced as if there were a *Y* instead of the initial *J*, as in *Yolande* in French. *Jowus* won't become *Jo* until much later, when we're both over twenty. I'm walking on eggshells...

- Nothing, hi (in Polish)

- Yeah, hi.

We meet with Ela around the kitchen table. I sip my cocoa without saying a word and make myself a tartine with that delicious cheese the Swiss make, Gruyère, which was waiting for us in the fridge. Osio has made a bit of an effort with our arrival in this flat.

I watch Jo, who is babbling. The lawyer who has been working for the Confederation for over twenty years, the mother of two small children she gave birth to in her forties, and who is in the process of getting divorced, has disappeared. Now, this morning, she's eleven again. She too, like my mother, is taller than me now. Hey, hey, I know exactly when I'm going to catch up with her and overtake her in height. It was a great moment when, at thirteen, I walked into her room with a pair of trousers in my hand and said: 'Look, they're too short for me'. For so long, I had to wear my sister's clothes, as they had become too small for her, that I rejoiced in being able to reverse this established order.

As a child, she always came to my defence when necessary, in the playground of our block of flats, if a boy teased me, or at school, if I felt I'd been wronged by a teacher and complained to her, Jo would go to the teachers' lounge to restore justice. But I didn't like her. We weren't close, which made our mother very unhappy. I was often downright mean to her; I don't know why. Looking back, I had no valid reason to hurt her. Maybe I just found her boring? Namby-pamby, yes, namby-pamby and uptight, whereas I was lively and outgoing, I was nicknamed the *crazy* one at compulsory school...

We didn't become friends until adulthood, when she was a law student, after returning from her Erasmus year in Germany, I seem to remember. I decide I'm going to fix that, now that I've

got a chance to have a new small older sister, I'm going to help her grow up. Phew, what a jumble that makes in my head!

- Zofia, what do you think? Ela asks insistently.

- What? I look at her surprised.

- No *what*, say *sorry*? I suggest a walk by the lake as soon as you've helped me clear the breakfast table. Jowuś says yes and you're in the clouds... Wake up! We're going for a walk, then I'll prepare lunch while you unpack and put your things away. I want everything in order in your rooms today. Is that clear?

- Yes! say both girls.

She's a demanding but fair mum, always consistent. She gives us lots of chores and we take an active part in the housework. It's a good thing, and it served us well in later life, even though Jo used to complain that she didn't let us be children. Can you blame Ela? She'd grown up without a mother, who died when she was just twelve. She never got to be an adolescent. She had to become mature and responsible far too early. That's what she wants us to be. I'm going to have to help her now more than last time, because I'm more mature than she is now. But how?

While I'm washing our three plates, I realise that I need to tell her what's happened to me. I need an accomplice; I'll never survive this strange adventure on my own. I won't be able to pass myself off as a nine-year-old, even, or rather: especially in his eyes! I've got too much knowledge, too much experience, too much life, too much history. I'll have to find a way of convincing her. I'll have to talk to her again today, maybe this afternoon, when Jo will as usual be slumped on her bed with a book in her hand...

\* \* \*

As planned, after the walk alongside the lake (and the climb up to the Pavillon, at my suggestion, to take in the splendid panorama of the region, taking advantage of the rare absence of the stratus cloud that usually covers Seeland winters), my sister and I unpack our things in our respective rooms. I find the school notebooks from the last few months spent in France. There's also a notepad and some pencils. I quickly put my clothes in the wardrobe, a bit haphazardly. Well, there aren't many of them, as we left Poland with luggage designed for a two-week summer holiday. If I have to tidy up, it'll be a quick job. I sit down at what will be my desk for the next few months. I have to make this list of important people to meet again and the circumstances in which I met them:

1. Sophie, my best friend since I was sixteen. This can be quite easy; I just need to be at the commercial high school at the start of the 1990 school year.

2. Angie, my angel, my love, the sweetest cat in the world, the one who prevented me from committing suicide on several occasions during my bouts of depression linked to the gradual deterioration of my altered vertebral column. I've adopted her, so I don't have the right to

abandon her, as she keeps reminding me with her sweet eyes. I'll have to go and collect her from the shelter in Geneva in January/February 2012! It seems so remote, and I already miss her so much.

3. Silvija, my Serbian painter girlfriend... I'm going to work out a strategy as soon as they put me in school; if my memory serves me right, it'll be very soon...

I'll stop here. Finally, is this list really necessary? Since my path will be different anyway, whatever I do, I'll meet other people and probably bump into old acquaintances by chance. Maybe it's better to improvise, otherwise I'll get too lost in the past, present and future.

One thing reassures me: I know who the people are who are worth getting to know and those who have proved to be disappointments, whether in friendship, love or sex. At least this time I won't be wasting my time with idiots... It's a great chance, a golden one. My friends, my lovers, maybe even a man I could fall genuinely in love with, they're all yet to be met. Another thing: I know where and when not to be to escape a few, shall we say, traumatic *incidents*. Since I'm being offered a new life, with all the difficulties I'm beginning to discover, I also need to grasp the good that can come of it. Isn't that what life is all about? A winding road with crossroads where you have to make decisions, however small, however seemingly insignificant, that can, through the butterfly effect, change everything.

- Girls! Time to eat! calls Ela.

Here we are, all together again for lunch. I'm going to have to get used to eating three times a day again. Maybe even take over the cooking. My mother never liked to cook, so her food, although edible, isn't really very tasty, with a few exceptions, and it's far too Polish. I'm going to intervene so that we switch to a more Mediterranean diet. Both Jowuś and Ela liked my very Italian-style cooking, so there's no reason why they shouldn't like it now, fifteen years in advance.

- Ela, would you agree to let me do the groceries and prepare the meals?

A very surprised look. Damn, I spoke in French. I repeat in Polish.

- Zofia, you've been very strange today. I think we need to talk face to face a bit later, OK?

- I'd love to, that's a great idea.

Jowuś eats without saying a word, without paying the slightest attention to the strange energy hovering between Ela and me. As I tidied up after breakfast, it's her turn for lunch, so I'm free. Normally, it's time for a dessert cigarette, but no, I don't even feel like it.

- If you've finished tidying your room, we can go and have a chat in the sitting room, says Ela. Jowuś, you can clean the cooker too, with washing-up liquid.

- Mmm, mumbles Jo.

I follow Ela into the living room. I close the door behind me.

- But why are you closing the door? says Ela. It doesn't matter if Jowuś hears us, you're not going to tell me any terrible secrets, are you?

- That's an understatement... I say under my breath. Isn't there a radio here? Wouldn't it be nice to have a little background music?



I see that there is indeed a radio. I turn it on. It's 1984, so Couleur3, my favourite FM station, already exists. I look for the right frequency and find it. A guy with a familiar voice says a joke, I laugh, then a song starts, so I turn to sit on the three-seater sofa. Ela is already settled in the only armchair, her gaze puzzled. And she hasn't heard a thing yet.

\* \* \*

I suppose it's up to me to start, since she's staring at me in silence. I'm not sure how to begin. Should I prepare her gently or strike a blow straight away? She's a very intelligent woman, she's noticed that my behaviour today is a bit odd, she's even said so... But she's also a mathematician, a rational thinker, she'll want evidence, concrete evidence. I jump in, not forgetting to speak Polish:

- You said you thought I was a bit strange today. What changes have you observed in my behaviour to justify such an opinion?

My Polish has never been perfect. After all, I only went to school for two years in Poland before we left. I mainly learnt by reading, when I was already an adult, and by talking to compatriots in Switzerland, family and friends or strangers during my stays in Poland. Yet it's clear that the way I express myself is that of a relatively cultured adult, not that of a nine-year-old. If I had any doubts about this, they are swept away by the expression I can see on Ela's face right now. She hesitates for a moment, then speaks in a very soft voice.

- For years I've been suggesting that you call me by my first name, you've never done it, and now, all of a sudden, you're calling me *Ela* as if you've always done it. It's nice, but it's surprising. And then, since this morning, you've hardly spoken at all, whereas I usually find it hard to shut you up! But if you do speak, every other time you start your sentences in French and then you stop, as if ashamed, and start again in Polish... it's quite disturbing, because I spoke to your French teacher before leaving Saint-Vit and she wasn't very optimistic about your progress...

Well, under the circumstances, I don't think there's any point in sugar-coating it, I might as well just throw it all at her. Besides, what am I risking? She's not going to report me to the Inquisition and have me burned at the stake for witchcraft, is she?

- Mummy dearest...

- Ah!

- No, it's nothing, I'll explain... It's just a way of addressing you when there's something important... In general, I've been calling you *Ela* for just under thirty years... (The first bomb is dropped, her eyes tell me.) You've probably read Kafka, haven't you? *Metamorphosis*?

- Kafka? What's Kafka got to do with it?

- Nothing, apart from the fact that he'd like it, that he'd make a great novel out of it...

- What on earth are you talking about?

This time I really must go, tell her everything, get it all out. In any case, I've already said too much to hide the rest, I can see that my mother is confused, I have to explain to her, even if she won't believe me at first. The arguments of evidence will follow, I'm sure of it. I just must make her understand that she's not crazy either...

- Mummy dearest (I'm doing it again, I can't help it!), last night when I went to bed I was forty-four years old and we were all celebrating thirty-five years of living in Switzerland. Jo and I, well, Jowuś and I, thanked you once again for bringing us here to live in this beautiful, well-organised country, as this decision has given us opportunities that we would never have had in Poland. And this morning I woke up, for the second time, on 2 December 1984. I realise that sounds incredible, but you have to admit that I've changed too much between the little girl you knew yesterday and the little girl you're looking at today, haven't I? If only in the way I express myself...

Silence. She says nothing. She just stares at me with eyes I can't quite make out. You can see disbelief in them, but also something else. I don't really know what it is, curiosity perhaps? I want to believe that she'll be able to understand. A trick to help her? Yes, I know!

- Do I speak English, Ela?

Ah, that wakes her up:

- What? But how can you speak English? Your mother tongue is Polish, and you've only just started speaking French! Of course you don't speak English.

OK. I repeat my little speech in English. As impossible as it sounds, her eyes widen even more. Obviously, there's no way I could have learnt English in one night.

- And for the record, I also speak Italian, Spanish and German, although I don't really like the latter.

- Ah yes! You speak German? All right, let's go out and prove it. But first, give me some current information, just so I know I'm not hallucinating.

I can see she's upset, or just nervous, but she wants evidence, and that's something. I deduce that my case isn't a lost cause, there might be a way of convincing her. I dig into my memory. It has to be said that at the age of nine, apart from the political situation in Poland, which directly concerned my family, I wasn't very aware of world events. I'm calling on my knowledge of contemporary history.

- Mmm... Well, Reagan has just been re-elected, so I can't predict his victory. Chernenko won't die until March 1985, and he'll be replaced by a guy who's finally younger than all those old fogies who've been running the USSR lately, a certain Mikhail Gorbachev. We should be hearing about him on the news very soon. I seem to remember that he went to see Thatcher in December 1984. And if not, in a few days' time, South African Bishop Desmond Tutu, a black man, will be awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

She's frozen, paralysed, pale in her chair. I'm starting to worry.

- Ela, I know it's crazy. But look at all the possibilities: I'm going to be able to help you get settled here, I know this country, this town, it's going to be fine. We'll start by finding you a decent job so that you're not exploited by Osio, with a good salary that will make you independent and all that! It just must be our secret, just you and me, no-one else can know. I don't really want to be burnt like a witch in the Middle Ages! In fact, witches, or so-called witches, were mostly burnt in the seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. And today, I'd rather be locked up in a psychiatric asylum...

My latest diatribe seems to have shaken her. I can even see the beginnings of a smile. Apparently the worst is over.

- What about Poland? she asks, her voice a little shaky.

Well, if she's asking that sort of question, it's because she's coming to terms with the idea that I'm probably telling the truth. At this point, she'd have to be really dumb not to realise the advantages of the situation.

- There will be a few more difficult years, but at the end of 1988 Jaruzelski will be forced into negotiations with *Solidarność* and on 4 June 1989 there will be genuinely free elections. The entire Soviet bloc will gradually disintegrate, starting with the satellites. The Berlin Wall will come down in November. It won't be perfect, but it will be a real improvement...

This time, she has tears in her eyes. She opens her arms:

- Come here, little girl, she says.

Ela isn't the cuddliest of mums, but I'm happy to curl up in her arms. She gives me a big hug and whispers 'thank you'.

I don't have the courage to tell her that virtually all the gains we've made in terms of new-found freedom and social progress will go down the drain when the populist, fascist, catholic right takes power twenty-five years later.

\* \* \*

We nevertheless went out for a while to *test* my German. At the station ticket office, I had a long talk with the employee about the *family card* (children under the age of sixteen travel free as long as one of the parents has a valid ticket). When I'd finished, Ela asked the lady at the ticket office, in French, if her daughter spoke German well. The lady said she did, very well. And that was that. We went back to the flat, both relatively serene. We agreed that tonight we would rest. Tomorrow we'll get down to work on a strategy: Jowuś's and my schooling, Ela's job, our integration in Switzerland, and all the things we can't think about now, which for her is only the end of her first twenty-four hours in Bienne, canton of Bern, Switzerland.

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