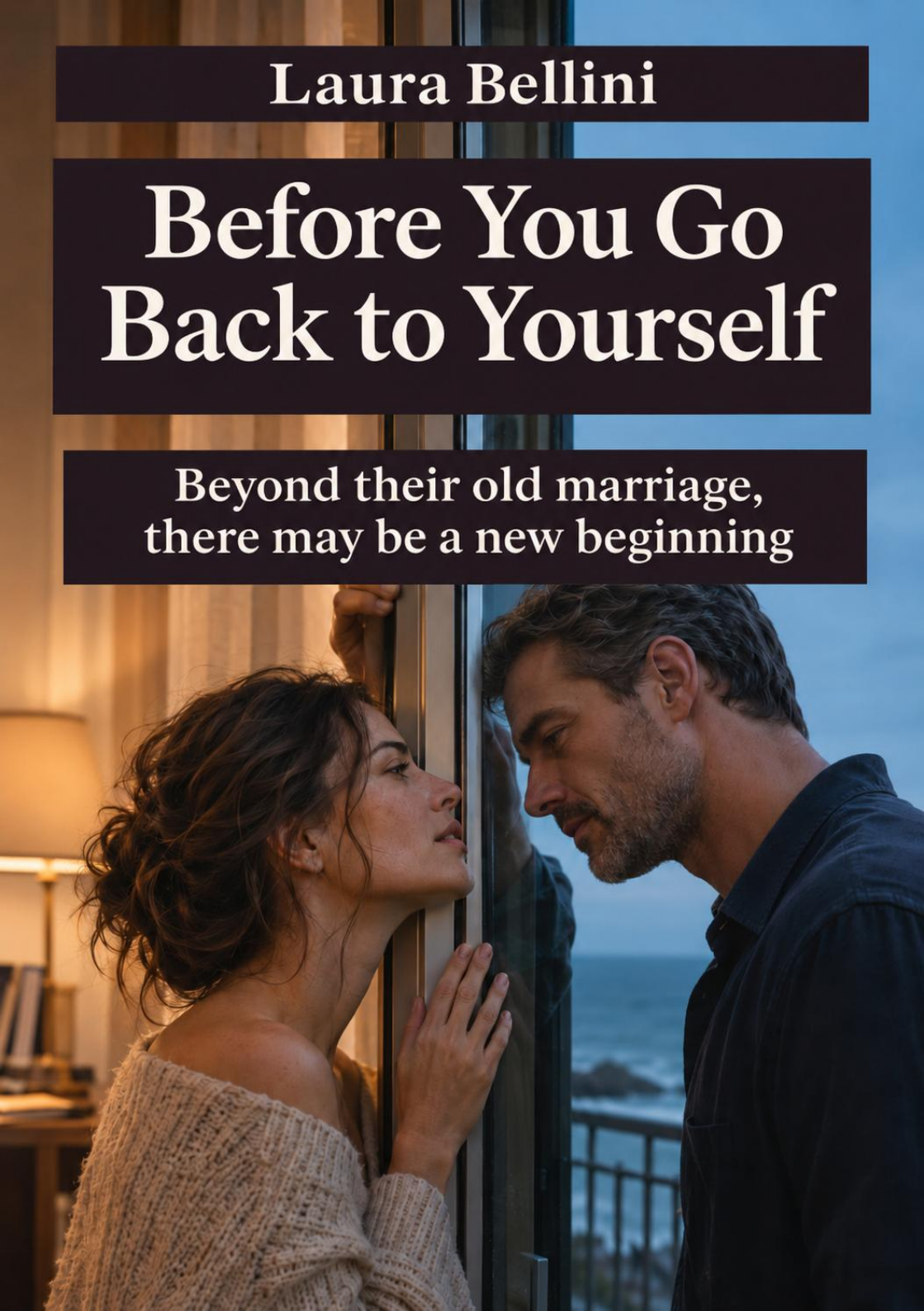
Laura Bellini

Before You Go Back to Yourself

Beyond their old marriage, there may be a new beginning



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INTRO

The first thing I did when I arrived at the coast was rearrange two armchairs.

They stood facing each other across a small table, as though someone had prepared the room for a conversation neither person wanted to begin. I pushed one chair beneath the window and the other into a corner beside the bookcase. Then I set my suitcase by the wardrobe and opened the balcony doors.

The October air smelled of salt, damp wood, and rain that had yet to arrive. Beyond the dunes, the sea was the color of tarnished silver. Waves broke against the shore with a persistence I envied. They needed no one's permission to return.

I had come here precisely because I wanted to stop returning.

I arranged three notebooks, my laptop, and a printed work schedule on the desk. Six weeks at a writers' retreat were supposed to be enough to finish editing a novel I had been putting off for months, always under the pretext of more urgent assignments. It was a story about a woman starting her life over. The author had written it with such honesty that, in places, I couldn't tell whether I was correcting someone else's sentences or defending myself against my own memories.

I was thirty-nine, ran my own editorial business, owned an apartment in Warsaw, and finally had a calendar in which I no longer needed to make room for someone else's needs. I considered that last achievement particularly significant. After my divorce, I had learned that independence didn't

always mean happiness, but at least it allowed me to choose what kind of loneliness I lived with.

My phone vibrated.

Are you there yet? Natalia wrote.

Yes. Room with a sea view. Peace and quiet. No surprises.

Her reply arrived immediately.

Don't tempt fate.

I smiled and silenced my phone.

The house was called Przystań. It was a prewar villa with tall windows, creaking stairs, and a library that had been the main reason I'd chosen the place. The organizers promised tranquility, time for independent work, and a handful of intimate literary gatherings. When I signed the agreement, I made it clear that I wasn't interested in leading workshops or attending mandatory social activities.

For six weeks, I wanted to belong entirely to myself.

At four o'clock, I went downstairs to reception to collect the library key. The owner, a woman named Helena, stood behind a wooden counter, struggling to make the printer work.

"Ms. Cicha, I'm glad you're here. There's a small complication with the residency program."

"If this is about additional meetings, I did explain that I wasn't—"

"No, no. All activities are optional. It's about a collection of literary translations we're preparing for an author event in November. One of the people involved won't arrive until this

evening. We could use your editorial opinion, for a separate fee, of course."

I studied her more closely.

"We didn't agree on any additional work."

"I know. That's why I'm asking, not informing you. You're perfectly free to refuse."

The distinction immediately improved my mood.

"Leave me the materials. I'll see whether I can find the time."

Helena handed me a folder bearing the project name. The first page contained a schedule and a list of participants, but the printer had apparently given up before producing the final column. The translator's surname stopped after its first letter.

"I'll email you the rest this evening," she said.

I returned upstairs with the folder tucked beneath my arm. On the landing, I passed a man carrying two cardboard boxes filled with books. He was younger than me, with a red beard and the harried expression of someone entrusted with far too many fragile objects.

"Library's downstairs?" he asked.

"Behind reception, on the left."

"Thanks. Apparently some well-known translator's arriving today. Then we'll have the full group."

I didn't ask for a name. I knew enough translators in literary circles for the news to arouse little curiosity.

For the next two hours, I worked with the balcony doors open. The wind kept scattering loose pages, so I weighed them down with a ceramic bowl I'd found on the windowsill. I

marked repetitions, refined dialogue, and rearranged paragraphs. One sentence made me stop longer than the others.

What hurt her most wasn't that he had left, but that long before leaving, he had stopped asking whether she wanted him to stay.

I read it three times.

Then I crossed out the word most and closed the document.

Some sentences came too close to the truth for me to know immediately how to improve them.

By the time I went downstairs for dinner, the dining room was nearly full. A dozen or so people sat around a long table, discussing new publishing houses, translations, and a literary festival in Gdynia. I found an empty seat near the end, beside a bespectacled woman who introduced herself as Irena and announced that she was writing a book about plants.

"About plants?" I asked.

"About people who can't take care of them. The plants are just an excuse."

I liked her immediately.

We ate soup and talked about publishers who sent revisions on Sundays, and why authors were more willing to delete entire chapters than individual adjectives. For the first time in ages, I didn't have to explain why I preferred working to making conversation for its own sake.

I was reaching for my water when I heard a voice from the corridor.

"Sorry I'm late. The train got stuck near Tczew, and then the taxi driver decided he knew a better route than the satnav."

My glass stopped a few inches above the table.

I knew that voice.

Not because I remembered every detail of how it sounded. For two years after the divorce, there had been times when I couldn't quite recall my former husband's laugh. But there was a particular calmness in the way he spoke, something that had once been capable of disarming me and had later driven me to despair.

I turned my head.

Łukasz Brzeziński stood in the dining-room doorway with a travel bag slung over his shoulder. He was forty-three, his dark hair touched with gray at the temples, and he wore a navy sweater I had never seen before. He looked tired from the journey. Once, I would have instinctively checked whether he'd managed to eat anything.

Now I watched Helena hurry over to greet him.

"Mr. Brzeziński, finally! We've prepared a room for you upstairs."

That was when he saw me.

He didn't smile. Nor did he come toward me. His gaze settled on my face, then shifted to the empty chair beside me, as though he needed to establish that I was really there.

For a moment, no one noticed our silence.

"Do you two know each other?" Irena asked.

I put down my glass.

"Yes," I answered.

Łukasz slowly removed the bag from his shoulder.

"We used to be married."

Silence fell over the dining room. It didn't last long, but it was enough to remind me how infuriatingly capable he was of expressing the most difficult truths in a single, deceptively simple sentence.

Helena looked horrified.

"Oh. I had no idea. I assure you, it's a complete coincidence."

"I believe you," I said, standing. "This isn't an organizational problem."

Łukasz stepped aside, leaving the doorway clear.

That small gesture hurt more than it should have. Once, he'd known exactly how much space I needed when I was upset. Evidently, there were things a person didn't forget, even after three years of living apart.

I passed him, catching the familiar scent of his cedar cologne, much fainter than it used to be.

"Magda," he said quietly.

I stopped at the door.

"I came here to work, Łukasz."

"So did I."

I turned toward him. He watched me without smiling, without that old certainty that if we talked long enough, we could explain everything.

"Then at least that's one thing we've already established," I said.

Upstairs, I opened the balcony doors, although the evening had turned cold. The sea was invisible; all I could

hear were the waves and the knocking of a loose shutter. The project folder lay on my desk, while the sentence about the man who had stopped asking still glowed on my laptop screen.

I picked up my phone to call Natalia, but instead of dialing, I sat down by the window.

The hardest part wasn't seeing Łukasz again.

The hardest part was discovering that, before I had even decided whether I wanted to speak to him, some part of me had already begun forming the first question.

Why did you let me walk away that evening when all along I was waiting for you to ask me to stay?

Chapter 1 - Terms of the Encounter

I woke at 6:17 the next morning, before my alarm went off. For several seconds, I had no idea where I was. I could hear the sea, the creaking wooden floor, and the wind rattling the balcony doors. Only when I saw the notebooks spread across my desk did I remember Przystań, six weeks of work, and the man whose presence had never featured in any of my plans.

I hadn't called Natalia the night before. I knew exactly how the conversation would go without having to dial her number. First disbelief, then questions I couldn't answer myself, and finally a firm recommendation not to do anything while my emotions were running high. Natalia had an irritating talent for offering sensible advice precisely when I found the idea of being sensible most tiresome.

I made coffee in the small kitchenette at the end of the corridor and returned to my room. For an hour, I worked on a dialogue between two sisters. One accused the other of never listening to her. The other replied that for years she'd heard nothing but complaints. After my fourth revision, I closed the document. I had stopped editing the author's style and started rewriting the characters' arguments.

I was due to collect the complete materials for the November project from Helena at nine. I went downstairs on time, wearing dark trousers and a pale sweater. Not because I wanted to look attractive. I simply liked clothes that made me feel competent. In front of the mirror, I tied back my hair, then let it down again. It annoyed me that I'd paid any attention to it at all.

The library occupied what had once been the main drawing room on the ground floor. Tall windows overlooked the garden, beyond which a pine forest began. Books from different decades lined the shelves, some bearing handwritten dedications, others brand-new. Helena sat at the largest table, surrounded by printouts, binders, and a ceramic pot of tea.

Łukasz stood by the window.

I saw him before he noticed me. His shirt sleeves were rolled up, and he held a pencil in one hand. He was reading something with such concentration that he didn't hear the door open. I remembered that expression. I'd always found him most attractive when he wasn't trying to impress anyone.

"Good morning," I said.

He looked up.

"Hi, Magda."

Helena rose with obvious relief.

"Wonderful, you're both here. I've prepared the documents. There are a few things I'd like to explain before you make a decision."

I sat on the opposite side of the table from Łukasz. I noticed that he made no attempt to move or pull his chair closer. His caution was sensible, yet there was something maddening about how perfectly he observed the distance between us.

The project was a bilingual collection of short stories by contemporary women writers from the Baltic countries. Przystań had received a grant to prepare the Polish edition, and the November author event would be the first public

presentation of the texts. Łukasz was responsible for translating three stories and ensuring stylistic consistency across the remaining translations. They needed a literary editor because the previous editor had withdrawn for health reasons.

"The deadline for delivering the materials is October thirtieth," Helena explained. "The publisher will handle proofreading and typesetting after that. Without the editorial work, we won't make it."

I examined the schedule.

"This isn't a minor consultation. We're talking about several hundred pages and an extremely tight deadline."

"That's why we've budgeted a separate fee."

"A fee doesn't add more hours to the day."

Łukasz put down his pencil.

"But we can change the way the work is organized. The texts are at different stages. They don't all need equally extensive editing."

I looked at him.

"I know how to plan an editorial project."

"I didn't say you didn't."

"Then let me finish."

Helena reached for her teacup. Łukasz lowered his eyes to the documents, but I noticed the tension in his jaw.

"What I suggest," I continued, "is that we first establish exactly how much work remains. I'm not signing a contract based on optimistic assumptions."

"Sensible," Łukasz agreed.

That single word sounded different coming from him now. When we were married, he could say it in a way that made me feel both appreciated and unbearably predictable.

Helena outlined the financial terms, explained the grant requirements, and left us alone for a few minutes to take a call from the publisher.

As soon as the door closed behind her, the silence became considerably more personal.

"I didn't know you'd be here," Łukasz said.

"I believe you."

"That's good."

"I didn't say I was comfortable with it."

He rested his hands on the edge of the table.

"Neither am I."

"You could withdraw."

He studied me carefully. I knew that look, although I'd managed to forget how difficult it could be to withstand. Łukasz never gave people his attention casually. When he listened, he concentrated so completely on the person speaking that every other sound seemed to lose its importance.

"I can't," he answered. "I signed the contract two months ago. I'm responsible for the deadline and the quality of the translations. I'm not leaving these people with a problem just because our situation is complicated."

"My situation isn't complicated. I came here with a specific plan."

"And I'm not questioning it."

"Your presence has already changed it."

The words came out more sharply than I intended.

For a moment, Łukasz watched me without speaking.

"I can't control what you feel when you see me," he finally replied. "I can control my own behavior. But if I'm going to stay, there's one thing I need."

I raised my eyebrows.

"What?"

"We need to talk about work the way we would with any other editor or translator. Without using professional decisions to settle what happened between us."

My first impulse was to laugh. Łukasz, who during our marriage had been capable of avoiding the simplest conversation about feelings for hours, was now proposing rules for communication.

"That's your condition?"

"Yes."

"And if I don't agree?"

"Then I'll ask Helena to find another editor. But I'll stay. I'm not going to promise you I'll leave."

I felt a familiar stab of anger.

Not because his answer was unfair.

Precisely because it wasn't.

"You don't have to remind me that you're capable of sticking to a decision," I said.

He turned toward the window.

"And you don't have to remind me that I used to make bad decisions."

I wanted to answer immediately, but something in his voice stopped me. He didn't sound like a man trying to win an argument. He sounded like someone who had recognized an old pattern and didn't want to set it in motion again.

Helena returned before I could say anything.

We went through the materials. It turned out that two stories were almost ready, one required another consultation with its author, and the problems in the others concerned narrative voices that hadn't been handled consistently. I had worked with similar texts many times. I recognized the flaws faster than I could put names to them, and within fifteen minutes I already had an idea for dividing the responsibilities.

I proposed two trial days without any commitment to continuing. During that time, I would assess the material, prepare a schedule, and draw up a quote. We would make our final decision after reviewing the first story.

"And I want to spend my mornings working on my own book," I added. "That's my priority. I'm not giving it up."

"We can work in the afternoons," Łukasz said.

"I don't want eight-hour meetings every day, either."

"Neither do I."

"What an unexpected moment of agreement," I muttered.

The corner of his mouth twitched.

Helena signed off on the preliminary arrangements and handed me a copy of the documents. When I left the library, I had the distinct feeling that I'd done something professionally sensible and personally dangerous.

Still, I had no intention of allowing a chance encounter to drive me away from a place I had chosen for myself.

That afternoon, I went into the garden. The rain had stopped, leaving the air cool and clear. I sat for a while on a bench beneath a pine tree, trying to organize my thoughts. My phone lay beside me. Natalia had replied to the message I'd finally sent that morning, confessing who had arrived at Przystań.

Remember, you don't have to be nice to him just because you once loved him.

I read the sentence twice.

The problem was that I'd never stopped thinking of Łukasz as someone worthy of affection. I'd simply stopped believing we could give it to each other without causing pain.

As I headed back toward the building, I saw him on the terrace. He was talking on the phone, leaning against the railing. I couldn't hear the entire conversation, only a few sentences.

"No, I'm not postponing it again. I promised I'd finish the translation before the end of the month. Yes, I know I missed a deadline last year."

He turned and noticed me. He didn't interrupt the call, merely acknowledged me with a nod.

I went inside, wondering what else had changed in his life.

He used to take on too many assignments and then work through the night, pretending everything was under control. I'd tried to help him several times. He always insisted he could manage, right up until the moment when it was too late.

Before dinner, I found an envelope beneath my door. Inside was a printed list of texts and a short note.

I've marked the passages I think need the most urgent consultation. I haven't changed them, so you can assess them independently.

Ł.

There was no personal message.

I should have felt relieved.

Instead, I spent a long time studying his handwriting.

The letter Ł looked exactly as it had on the notes he used to leave on our kitchen table. Except those messages had concerned groceries, a broken tap, or the fact that he'd be home late.

Once, on the edge of one of those notes, he'd added two words:

Love you.

I could no longer remember what I'd done with that piece of paper.

That evening, we met again near the stairs. Łukasz was carrying several books, while I had my laptop tucked beneath my arm. For a moment, we stood facing each other, as though we were both wondering whether starting a conversation would be appropriate.

"Thank you for the materials," I said.

"Will they be useful?"

"Yes. Although I disagree with your assessment of the third story."

"I suspected you might."

"Why?"

"Because I marked the exact passage I'd spent the longest time trying to defend."

I looked at him with interest.

"And now?"

"Now I'd like to know why you think it doesn't work."

There was no provocation in his voice. Only the curiosity I'd once loved most about him. Łukasz could listen to an argument even when accepting it meant abandoning hours of work. He had always been braver in literary matters than in personal ones.

"We'll discuss it tomorrow," I replied.

He nodded, then moved aside to let me pass.

I stopped two steps up.

"Łukasz?"

He turned.

"Yes?"

"That condition you set in the library... Do you honestly think we can separate work from our past?"

He was silent for a moment.

"I don't know," he finally said. "But I'd like us at least to try not to make the same mistakes again."

I didn't answer.

I returned to my room, closed the door, and put my laptop on the desk. Outside, the sky was slowly darkening, and the lights in neighboring houses were coming on one by one.

For the first time since arriving, it occurred to me that perhaps the greatest threat to my peace wasn't Łukasz's presence.

It was the possibility that this time, he might genuinely want to talk.

Chapter 2 - The Boundaries of Closeness

We began our first working session with an argument over a single sentence.

It wasn't a bad beginning. As an editor, I'd learned that people who could argue honestly about words often worked better together than those who agreed with everything immediately. The problem was that Łukasz knew my arguments from years ago. He knew when I genuinely considered a sentence unsuccessful and when I was simply irritated by excessive ornamentation.

We sat at the long table in the library. Beyond the window, fine rain blurred the outlines of the pine trunks. Łukasz had brought two copies of the translation, a dictionary, and a notebook. I spread out my laptop, printouts, and colored page markers. A pot of hot tea stood between us.

"This sentence explains too much," I said, indicating the third paragraph. "The protagonist doesn't need to say she's afraid of going back. It's enough that she stands outside the door for five minutes."

Łukasz leaned over the text.

"It's more explicit in the original."

"I know. But in Polish, it sounds as though the author doesn't trust the reader."

"Maybe she doesn't."

"Then we can help her."

He smiled.

"You always wanted to help authors more than they wanted to be helped."

"And you always fell in love with sentences simply because they were difficult to translate."

"That's unfair."

"It's a professional observation."

For a moment, we looked at each other across the table. There was something unguarded about his smile, as though he'd forgotten what we were to each other now. I returned it before I could stop myself.

Then we went back to work.

For two hours, we read through successive passages. Łukasz explained the differences between the original and the translation, while I proposed stylistic solutions. We disagreed several times. At one point, I asked him to read a dialogue aloud. When he heard how unnatural one of the lines sounded, he crossed it out himself.

"All right," he admitted. "You were right."

"I'll make a note of the date."

"No need. I remember every occasion when you've been right."

"You'd need an exceptionally good memory."

He laughed softly.

For a moment, the sound made me stop seeing the translator sitting across from me. Instead, I saw the man who used to wake me on Sunday mornings with the smell of coffee and read absurd passages from newspapers aloud until I started laughing.

I looked away.