Before You Open the Next Bottle

She won't be part of his carefully arranged story



Laura Bellini

Before You Open the Next Bottle

She won't be part of his carefully arranged story

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384906187

ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski

CONTENTS

INTRO 4

Chapter 1 - Conditions That Were Never in the Agreement 11

Chapter 2 - What Never Makes It onto the Schedule 22

Chapter 3 - What Cannot Be Planned 34

Chapter 4 - Beyond the Frame 44

Chapter 5 - The Right to an Evening of Her Own 57

Chapter 6 - A Taste That Cannot Be Mistaken 69

Chapter 7 - Between What Is Seen and What Is Real 82

Chapter 8 - Beyond the Boundaries of the Vineyard 96

Chapter 9 - When the Plan Is No Longer Enough 109

Chapter 10 - Before We Open the Next Bottle 119

Chapter 11 - A Morning Without Promises 134

Chapter 12 - The Family Signature 144

Chapter 13 - The Price of a Beautiful Story 155

Chapter 14 - What Remains Between Us 168

Chapter 15 - Everything He Didn't Say 179

Chapter 16 - The Boundary That Cannot Be Moved 191

Chapter 17 - Everyone Must Choose Their Own Side 201

Chapter 18 - The First Price of the Truth 211

Chapter 19 - The Price of the Truth 222

Chapter 20 - Before You Open the Next Bottle 232

INTRO

The first thing I noticed at the Rataj vineyard was the smell of crushed grapes. Sweet and heavy, mingling with the dampness of the earth and the cool air of the approaching evening. The second was the rows of crates arranged neatly in front of the farm building. The third was a man who was moving one of them, even though it was already standing exactly where it belonged.

I parked my car beside the wooden gate and glanced at my watch. I had forty minutes. Enough time to take a few photographs, gather material for my own notes, and get back to the guesthouse before dark. The real work would begin the following day. Today, I only wanted to get a feel for the place, the light, and the people. No schedules, no official statements, no smiles on demand.

For several months, I had been working on an idea for a cookbook that wasn't supposed to become yet another collection of recipes for impressive dishes made with ingredients nobody could find in an ordinary grocery store. I wanted to tell stories about food connected to a particular place, a particular season, and the people who genuinely knew where the things on their tables came from. My publisher hadn't promised me a contract yet. I had, however, been given an opportunity to present part of the project, and I had no intention of wasting it.

A vineyard in Lower Silesia seemed like the perfect place to start. The grapes were ripening, people had been working since dawn, and the season was supposed to end with a dinner the organizers wanted to make into something more meaningful than an ordinary thank-you to the workers. My

assignment was to document the harvest and help create a story about a place that had spent years building its reputation in the local market. The fee was good, and the material could become part of my future book.

Provided I didn't let anyone else write that story for me.

I took out my camera, hung it around my neck, and headed towards the rows of vines. The sun was already sinking, giving the leaves a warm, almost coppery glow. I took several photographs of hands gathering the grapes, old wooden crates, and traces of soil on one worker's boots. I wasn't interested in perfectly clean compositions. I preferred imperfections because they were what made a place look real.

At the end of one of the rows, I noticed two men. They were speaking quietly, but their body language said more than their words. The older man was holding a piece of paper, while the younger one pointed towards a section of the hillside. It didn't look like an ordinary conversation about the harvest schedule. As I approached, the older man slipped the document into his pocket, and the younger one turned away and walked off without saying goodbye.

I took a photograph of the empty row before anyone could step into my frame.

"It's better not to photograph this particular spot today."

The voice came from behind me. I turned around.

The man I'd seen moving the crates earlier was standing a few steps away. He looked to be around forty, with dark hair streaked with a few silver strands at the temples and a shirt with its sleeves rolled up. He didn't look like someone who had spent the afternoon posing for promotional

photographs. There was a smear of dark grape juice on his forearm and a small scratch on his hand.

"Why?" I asked.

"Because there's nothing worth showing there."

I looked at the row, then back at him.

"That's interesting. A moment ago, I thought it was the most interesting thing around here."

For a moment, he studied me without smiling. He wasn't used to people answering his questions with questions of their own. Or perhaps he simply wasn't in the mood for conversation.

"Are you with the editorial team?"

"No. I'm working on a food-related project."

"So, the press after all."

"Not exactly. I write books."

"About wine?"

"About food. Wine is sometimes part of it."

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"That's probably the first time someone has diplomatically told me they're not interested in what I do."

"I didn't say I wasn't interested. I said not everything has to be about wine."

This time, he genuinely smiled, although only briefly.

He introduced himself as Wiesław Rataj, the owner of the vineyard. He said it calmly, without pride but without false modesty either. His eyes moved from my camera to the notebook sticking out of my bag.

"If you want to put together a good piece, you should speak to me before publishing any photographs."

"I can speak to anyone who has something interesting to say. I can't promise, though, that every statement will make it into the text."

"I take it you like having the last word."

"I like having my own."

He accepted my answer without comment. I noticed that he didn't try to defend himself or convince me that I ought to see things differently. Instead, he picked up the crate he'd been moving earlier and carried it under the shelter. He didn't call anyone over to help, even though two workers were standing nearby.

There was something about him that didn't quite fit my first impression. He seemed like a man accustomed to making decisions, but not someone who believed other people should carry out his every request. When one of the workers called him from the other end of the yard, Wiesław immediately interrupted our conversation and went over. He listened carefully without cutting the man off. Only afterwards did he respond, pointing towards a different place where the crates could be stored.

I returned to my camera. For several minutes, I photographed the harvest, but my thoughts kept drifting back to that row of vines and the document the older man had tucked away so quickly. I wasn't about to jump to conclusions. I didn't know what their business was, what had happened before, or why their conversation had ended that way. Still, I made a brief note in my notebook:

Family vineyard. Not everything here looks as peaceful as the surroundings suggest.

When I returned to the yard, Wiesław was on the phone. He was standing by the open door of the building, leaning against the frame with one hand. He wasn't speaking loudly, but when I came a few metres closer, I caught a fragment of what he was saying.

"Not now. We have guests tomorrow. We're not going to discuss this in front of everyone again."

He fell silent, listening to the response.

"That's exactly why we need to stay calm."

He ended the call and slipped his phone into his pocket. When he noticed me, his expression returned to what it had been before. As though he hadn't just been speaking to someone he couldn't seem to reach an agreement with.

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Some of it."

"And the rest?"

"That depends on whether I can find it without someone's help."

"You're not very trusting."

"I have enough experience to know that people often tell others exactly what they want them to remember about themselves."

He looked at me silently for a moment. Something difficult to identify appeared in his eyes. Perhaps curiosity. Perhaps a warning.

"And you?" he asked. "Are you always looking for hidden meanings?"

"Only when the surface looks suspiciously polished."

This time, he didn't smile.

We said our goodbyes briefly. He told me we'd meet the following day at the main building to discuss the details of our cooperation. I nodded, although I didn't particularly like the fact that it sounded more like an established arrangement than a suggestion.

On my way back to the car, I looked through the photographs on my camera screen. In one of them, Wiesław had accidentally appeared in the background. He wasn't looking at the lens. He was standing sideways, his hands resting on a crate, talking to one of the workers. He looked completely different from the man who had introduced me to the vineyard. Less formal, more natural.

My finger hovered over the delete button, but in the end, I left the photograph where it was.

I didn't want to write about a man I'd known for barely a few minutes. Nor did I intend to let his presence change my plans. I had my own work, my own deadline, and an idea that mattered more to me than another well-paid collaboration.

And yet, when I started the engine, I looked once more towards the building. Wiesław was standing in the doorway, talking to someone I couldn't see. He didn't wave goodbye. He simply watched as I drove away.

I thought that the next day I'd have to make my position clear. I could document the grape harvest, help prepare the dinner, and even write something positive about the vineyard. But I wasn't going to pretend everything was perfect just because someone wanted that particular image to be presented to the world.

I didn't yet know whether Wiesław Rataj could accept a story he didn't have complete control over. What I did know

was that his gaze had stayed with me longer than it should have.

And for the first time in a long while, I found myself wondering whether it was possible to get close to someone without allowing him to decide who we would become in his story.

Chapter 1 - Conditions That Were Never in the Agreement

The following morning, I arrived at the vineyard's main building ten minutes before our scheduled meeting. Not because I was particularly concerned about being punctual for Wiesław Rataj. I simply disliked starting a professional relationship in a situation where someone might think I had been waiting for them for too long. I had my own schedule for the day, a list of shots I wanted to capture, and several ideas for the material that I intended to discuss before anyone started telling me how I should do my job.

The building was small but well maintained. Pale walls, wooden shutters, and a wide terrace overlooking the vineyard. Inside, there was an office connected to a modest tasting room. Photographs documenting the successive stages of the estate's development hung on one of the walls. The oldest showed several men standing in front of a small section of vines. In the later photographs, the vineyard covered increasingly more land, while the building itself appeared progressively more modern.

I stopped in front of a photograph showing Wiesław standing beside an older man. Both were smiling, although the vineyard owner's smile seemed more restrained. The caption beneath it read: "A Tradition That Brings Generations Together."

"Do you like it?"

I turned my head. Wiesław had entered the room carrying two cups of coffee.

"It's interesting."

"That's not quite the same as liking it."

"I don't like judging photographs based on their captions."

He handed me one of the cups. It smelled of freshly ground coffee, with nothing added.

"Black. Is that right?"

"I don't remember telling you how I take my coffee."

"Yesterday, you didn't order anything while we were talking. I thought black would be a safe choice."

"And what if I take it with milk?"

"There's a fridge in the kitchen."

I looked at him over the rim of my cup.

"Do you always solve problems that easily?"

"Only the ones with simple solutions."

I smiled despite myself. Wiesław took a leather folder off a chair and placed it on the table. He no longer looked like the man I'd met among the crates the previous evening. He was wearing a light-coloured shirt, dark trousers, and a watch with a fairly simple face. His sleeves were still rolled up, as though even in the office he had no intention of completely giving up working outdoors.

"Before we begin," he said, "I'd like to establish exactly what you intend to do."

"I thought that was why we were meeting."

"Yesterday, you said you were writing a book. I'd like to know what role our vineyard is supposed to play in it."

I took out my notebook.

"I'm not planning to write a catalogue of your products. I'm interested in the process: from the harvest to the table. I

want to show the people, their work, the local ingredients, and the way meals are prepared during the grape harvest. Wine will be part of the story, but it won't be the only protagonist."

"And our family?"

The question came too quickly to be dismissed as accidental.

"If your family has something to say about the estate, they may appear in the material. But I'm not planning to write a family chronicle."

Wiesław sat down opposite me.

"That's precisely why I invited you to work with us. I don't want another publication in which a vineyard is reduced to a few bottles and a photograph of the sunset. I'd like people to see how much work goes into this season."

"That, at least, we can do."

"There's one condition."

I rested my pen against the page.

"I'm listening."

"I don't want you photographing absolutely everything without discussing it with me first. Some areas are part of the estate's working facilities, not part of the visitor experience. I'd also like to approve photographs featuring our employees."

"I have no objection to obtaining permission from the people being photographed. That's a normal part of my work. However, I won't agree to having the entire project approved by the owner of the property."

"I wasn't talking about the entire project."

"Not yet."

He was silent for a moment. He didn't look offended, more like someone who had just discovered that the conversation was going to be more difficult than he'd anticipated.

"I understand that your independence matters to you."

"My credibility matters to me. That's a little more than a matter of professional pride."

"I'm not going to dictate what you should write."

"Good. In that case, we won't have a problem."

Wiesław opened the folder and took out several sheets of paper. They contained the grape harvest schedule, a list of people responsible for individual tasks, and a preliminary plan for the dinner marking the end of the season. Everything had been prepared meticulously. Every hour had its place, and each name was accompanied by a brief description of its responsibilities.

"The dinner will take place in two weeks," he said. "We want to invite the employees, a few people from the region, and our regular partners. I don't want it to feel like a promotional event. More like a genuine celebration of the season and everything we've accomplished."

"How many people?"

"About thirty."

"And the menu?"

"We have a few suggestions. I'd like you to help us organise them. I'm not expecting you to do the cooking. What matters to me is the story behind the products we use."

He slid another sheet of paper towards me. It contained the names of local suppliers, along with different cheeses, vegetables, and meats. Some of the entries had handwritten notes beside them.

I began reading. The longer I looked at the list, the more I liked the idea. There were no unnecessarily elaborate ingredients or attempts to imitate a restaurant featured in a prestigious culinary guide. Someone had genuinely thought about what could be prepared using products available in the surrounding area.

"Who put the menu together?"

"The two of us. The cook who prepares meals for the team and me."

"What's her name?"

"Marta. She's been working with us for six years."

"I'd like to speak with her."

"Of course."

"And see the kitchen."

"Of course."

"And talk to the people working the harvest without you being present."

Wiesław raised his eyebrows.

"Why without me?"

"Because people behave differently when the owner is standing next to them. You don't have to do anything. Simply knowing that you might hear their answer is enough."

For a moment, I thought he was about to object. Instead, he leaned back in his chair.

"You have a fairly specific idea of how this work should be done."

"I have experience."

"It shows."

His words didn't sound like a polite compliment. There was a note of genuine appreciation in his voice, and I found it more pleasing than I wanted to admit.

"In return," I continued, "I can prepare documentation of the harvest, conduct short interviews with the employees, and create culinary material connected with the dinner. You'll receive a selection of photographs for the vineyard's communications, under a separate licence. I won't be transferring my copyright."

"I wasn't going to ask you to."

"I prefer to discuss these things at the beginning."

"Then please, go on."

For the next fifteen minutes or so, we went through the details. We agreed that I wouldn't photograph financial documents or private rooms. The employees would decide for themselves whether they wanted to appear in the material. Each person would be allowed to read their own statement before publication, but they wouldn't have the right to change the entire story. Wiesław also accepted that he wouldn't be approving my written descriptions.

There was one issue left, and from the beginning, it had seemed to me the most important.

"I'd like to know who will be making the decisions about the dinner," I said.

"I'm responsible for organising it."

"And the cook?"

"Marta is responsible for the kitchen."

"So if she suggests changing the menu, will she be able to do that?"

"If she has a good reason, yes."

"And what if you don't like her suggestion?"

Wiesław studied me more carefully.

"Then we'll talk about it."

"That's not an answer."

"You don't have to treat every difference of opinion like a business negotiation."

"And you don't have to treat every decision as yours to make."

For several seconds, we looked at each other without speaking. Eventually, Wiesław closed the folder.

"All right. Marta has the final say on matters concerning the kitchen. I'm responsible for the budget and organisation. You're responsible for the documentation and the material."

"Now we can work."

I stood up, put away my notebook, and reached for my camera. Wiesław rose from his chair as well.

"I'd like to show you around part of the estate."

"I can go on my own."

"I know. But there are places where it will be easier to explain a few things if I'm there."

He walked out first, and I followed him. Outside, the sun had already warmed the stone tiles of the terrace. Voices carried from a distance, along with the sound of crates being

moved. Wiesław walked at an unhurried pace, without trying to dictate how quickly I should follow. He stopped beside successive rows of vines, pointing out the different varieties and explaining the differences in their harvesting times.

I listened carefully. He knew far more than his economical way of speaking suggested. He could identify the vines that required special attention, remembered the names of the people responsible for particular sections of the crop, and noticed even the smallest changes in the condition of the grapes. He didn't talk about wine in the language of advertising brochures. He spoke about the weather, the soil, the work, and the decisions that sometimes had to be made long before their consequences became visible.

"You don't look like someone who enjoys delegating tasks," I remarked.

"And you don't look like someone who enjoys having someone looking over her shoulder."

"So we both have a problem."

"Perhaps."

He stopped beside a collection of crates filled with freshly harvested grapes. He picked up one bunch, examined it, and put it aside.

"These will go separately."

"Why?"

"Some of the grapes are damaged. I don't want them ending up in the same batch."

I took a photograph of his hand and the crate. This time, he didn't object.

"May I?" I asked, gesturing towards the camera.

"You've already taken it."

"I'm asking whether I can keep it."

"If it's a good photograph."

"That won't be for you to decide."

He looked at me with amusement.

"I'm beginning to understand that this is going to be a long collaboration."

"Two weeks. Don't get too comfortable."

When we returned to the yard, a woman in a dark apron approached us. She had short hair, an energetic stride, and the expression of someone who had no intention of wasting time on unnecessary politeness.

"Wiesiek, I need a decision about the tables."

"What happened?"

"The ones from storage won't fit in the dining room. And if we put them on the terrace, we'll have to rearrange the entire kitchen setup."

"We could combine the tables from the dining room with the ones from storage."

"We could, but then people would be sitting like passengers on a train."

Wiesław glanced at me.

"This is Marta. She runs our kitchen and organises the meals."

"Noemi Górska," I introduced myself. "We'll be working together on the dinner."

Marta looked at me with unmistakable curiosity.

"So you're the one who's going to be asking questions about food?"

"That's the plan."

"Good. Because I've got a few things to say."

"Then I'd be happy to listen."

Marta turned back to Wiesław.

"See? It's possible to talk to people without immediately deciding everything for them."

He didn't comment. I, however, made a mental note that this woman clearly wasn't someone who accepted his decisions without question.

"I'll show you the kitchen," Marta offered. "But I should warn you, there's more work in there than there is space today."

"Those are exactly the kinds of places I'm interested in."

Wiesław looked at me as though he wanted to say something, but in the end, he simply nodded.

"Then I'll leave you in good hands."

I watched him walk away towards the farm building. Only when he disappeared around the corner did Marta lean towards me.

"Don't take everything he says as the final version of events."

"I don't intend to."

"Good. Because Wiesiek sometimes really wants everything to look the way it's supposed to."

I didn't have time to ask what exactly she meant. Marta opened the kitchen door and invited me inside. And for the

first time, I wondered whether the most interesting part of this assignment might not be in the vineyard at all.

Chapter 2 - What Never Makes It onto the Schedule

The kitchen turned out to be considerably larger than the building's exterior had suggested. It had two wide worktops, an old cooker, a modern refrigerator, and shelves filled with jars of preserves. Pots of herbs stood on the windowsill, while against one wall there was a wooden table with a basket of apples and a bowl of plums someone had left behind.

Marta didn't begin by showing me the equipment. First, she showed me the refrigerator, then the pantry, followed by a small room where the ingredients intended for the employees' meals were stored. Only after making sure I knew where everything was did she hand me an apron.

"You don't have to chop anything," she said. "Unless you'd like to."

"I'd rather talk about the food first."

"Then sit down. Coffee?"

"I've already had some."

"Good. Around here, coffee is more of a working tool than a pleasure."

I sat at the wooden table and opened my notebook. Marta took several sheets of paper from a drawer, each containing suggestions for dishes. They weren't professionally prepared recipes, more like working lists of ingredients accompanied by notes about their availability.

"The dinner is supposed to be elegant, but not over the top," she explained. "Wiesław wants the guests to see that

we can prepare something special. I want people to be able to eat a proper meal instead of staring at a plate for three hours."

"I understand."

"And I don't want any tiny portions that need a five-minute explanation."

I laughed.

"Then I think we're going to get along."

We started with the starters. Marta suggested roasted beetroot with goat's cheese, toasted bread with roasted pepper spread, and small portions of pâté made according to her mother's recipe. There would also be local cheeses and sourdough bread. For the main course, she was planning roasted meat with root vegetables, while those who didn't eat meat would have mushroom risotto.

"And dessert?" I asked.

"Apple pie. Not the kind you have to photograph from three different angles to make it look bigger. Just an ordinary, good apple pie."

"Finally, someone speaking my language."

Marta smiled broadly.

We talked for another fifteen minutes or so. She told me about the suppliers, how the menu changed with the seasons, and how most of the employees preferred a simple lunch served on time to an elaborate dish arriving an hour later. I wrote down several names and asked whether I could photograph her while she was preparing meals.

"If you don't get in my way," she agreed. "But I have one condition."

"What is it?"

"Don't turn me into a woman who spends her entire life in the kitchen because she enjoys making everyone else happy. I'm simply good at cooking, and I have no intention of hiding that."

"Deal."

When we'd finished, Marta walked me to the exit. In the corridor, I passed Wiesław, who was talking to one of the employees. He didn't interrupt the conversation, but when he saw me, he gestured towards a side door.

"If you have a moment, I'd like to show you something."

"That depends on what it is."

"A place where we can discuss the details of the dinner in peace. The kitchen wasn't particularly quiet, I imagine."

"It was quiet enough for me to hear everything Marta had to say."

"Then you have the advantage."

"I don't see it that way."

He led me to a small room at the end of the corridor. There was a table, several chairs, and a bookcase filled with documents. A map of the vineyard hung on the wall, with the individual plots marked on it. Wiesław closed the door but didn't turn the key. He left it slightly ajar, as though he didn't want to shut himself off completely from the sounds of the estate.

"We can work here," he said. "We don't have to occupy the tasting room every time."

"A practical solution."

He placed the dinner plan on the table. This time, it wasn't a completed schedule but an empty table with spaces for names, times, and notes.

"I'd like us to establish exactly what we'll be preparing over the next two weeks."

"So would I."

I sat down opposite him and took out my notebook. For a while, we discussed the order of events. We agreed that on the first day I'd concentrate on the harvest and conversations with the employees, while the following day would be devoted to documenting the preparations in the kitchen. Over the next few days, I'd be able to return to selected locations if I found that I needed additional material. We'd plan the dinner together, but Marta would remain responsible for preparing the dishes.

"I'd also like us to take a few family photographs," Wiesław said.

I didn't look up immediately.

"Who exactly do you mean?"

"My family. My parents, my sister, perhaps her children, if they want to come."

"Does everyone know about this idea?"

"I haven't spoken to everyone yet."

"Then we can't put it in the schedule as a confirmed item."

"Why not?"

"Because people aren't decorative elements. We have to ask them first whether they want to participate."

Wiesław rested his forearms on the table.