Don't Leave Me in the End Credits

On screen, they can hide anything. Between them, less and less



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ROMANS

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INTRO

In Kraków, even the rain seemed like part of the festival programme. It streamed down the cinema's tall windows in thin trails, blurring the neon lights and the reflections of people who had been moving between screenings, panel discussions and meetings since morning. The foyer smelled of damp coats, coffee and freshly printed festival catalogues. I had my laptop tucked under my arm and a flash drive in my jacket pocket containing a ninety-second film excerpt that was supposed to open a door for me, provided I could show it to the right person.

I hadn't come here looking for inspiration. I'd come for a decision.

At nine that evening, I was due to meet a producer who was looking for an editor for a feature-length documentary. She wasn't promising a permanent position or a fortune. She was offering something considerably more valuable: my name in the contract, independence at the editing desk, and the opportunity to guide a film from its first cut to its final version. After years of work in which my editing had rescued other people's ideas, I wanted a project I could finally put my name to without the word "collaboration" appearing in small print beside it.

I had prepared a presentation, a short sample and three sentences I had no intention of watering down. I didn't want to tell her I was flexible, available at short notice and capable of working under pressure. Anyone who had ever handed me footage at the last minute already knew that. I wanted to say that I could find a story in someone else's chaos without surrendering the right to shape it to somebody else.

At a small table against the wall, I opened my laptop and watched the excerpt one more time. It wasn't flashy. There was no music telling the audience when to feel moved, no sentence that could be pulled out and turned into a trailer. There was a woman sorting through photographs left behind by her late father, a long moment of silence, and her hand hovering over a single picture. I'd kept that pause, even though the producer of my previous project had asked me to shorten it. It was precisely there that the woman stopped pretending she knew what she felt. That was the kind of decision I wanted to be accountable for under my own name.

The meeting with the producer wasn't guaranteed. She still had two other people to see, and her documentary might receive funding or remain stuck at the stage of promises. Even so, I'd rather risk a conversation about work I could help create than accept another assignment that consisted of rescuing someone else's deadline. Over the years, I'd learned that independence rarely arrived in the form of some grand declaration. Sometimes it began with a single sentence in a contract, the right to approve the final cut, or someone asking for your opinion before making a decision.

I was checking the audio through my headphones when applause rose from the screening room. The film had ended. The credits appeared on the screen, and I instinctively looked up. Among the names, I spotted Rufin Gaj.

I knew the name before I knew the man. It had appeared in the credits of a documentary I'd edited two years earlier — a film made in a hurry, with footage shot in different seasons and a subject who hated repeating the same sentences. Rufin had been responsible for cinematography. I had taken hundreds of hours of recordings and shaped them

into a story that finally had a beginning, a middle and an end. We'd worked separately, exchanging comments through the producer. We'd never met.

The film had received invitations to several screenings, and Rufin had given a handful of interviews. I remembered one in particular because a journalist had asked how they'd managed to preserve such an intimate rhythm in the storytelling. He'd replied that the camera had been close to the people, and the footage itself had shown him where to linger. He hadn't lied. He simply hadn't told the whole truth. At the time, I'd considered it a minor thing, one of those professional shortcuts that shouldn't matter more than a well-edited scene. Then I'd seen my name pushed to the very end of the credits, followed by a thank-you for my consultation and several names belonging to people who had spent considerably less time on the film than I had.

I had no intention of reopening that chapter. That wasn't why I'd come to Kraków.

I left the foyer and headed down the corridor, looking for somewhere quieter to listen to my excerpt. A small crowd had gathered by the screening room doors. Someone was talking about cinematography, while someone else was trying to arrange an interview. Rufin stood in the middle of it all, a microphone in his hand. I caught sight of him for only a moment, between the shoulders of two people: tall, wearing a dark shirt, with a camera slung over his shoulder, as though even at a film festival he wasn't quite willing to part with his work. He spoke calmly, without needing to raise his voice. People listened.

He didn't look like someone who had to fight for attention. He didn't gesture unnecessarily or search the faces around him for approval after every sentence. When someone in the

audience asked a question, he waited for the whispers to die down before answering. I remembered his patience with shots other people would have considered wasted. Back then, I'd taken it for a professional virtue. Now I wondered whether he was equally patient when listening to people whose work never made it onto the screen.

"Trusting the footage is the most important thing," he said. "If you spend too long trying to control it, you stop seeing what actually happened."

I stopped, although I hadn't intended to. I knew that idea. I sometimes expressed it myself, though in different words. In an editing suite, it meant something very specific to me: you couldn't put emotions into a subject's mouth that they hadn't shown, or smooth over contradictions simply because they didn't look good in a trailer. Coming from Rufin, it sounded like a principle anyone standing close enough to a camera could claim as their own.

I turned away before anyone from the festival team could recognise me. A message from the producer was waiting on my phone.

"I'm here. Let me know when you can come down to the café."

I replied that I'd be there in ten minutes. Then I opened my presentation and checked the file again. Everything worked. I had a plan, I had the footage, and I didn't need anyone from my past deciding how my evening would unfold.

My phone vibrated again. This time, it wasn't the producer. The number was unfamiliar, but the signature at the end of the message left no room for doubt.

"Paloma, Rufin Gaj here. I know you're at the festival. I'd like to talk about a film we need to finish. Could you spare an hour tomorrow?"

I read the message twice. "We need to" was a remarkably bold choice of words from someone I'd never exchanged a single sentence with. I didn't know where he'd got my number. I also didn't know why he'd assumed that, after what had happened with the previous film, I'd be willing to work under his name again. I could simply ignore him. I could delete the message and head downstairs to the meeting that had brought me to Kraków in the first place.

Instead, I looked towards the screening room again. Rufin was finishing his conversation with one of the organisers. For a moment, his gaze travelled along the corridor and settled on me. He didn't smile or wave. He simply looked at me, as though he were waiting to see whether I'd let him approach.

In my pocket, I carried a flash drive containing my own future. On my phone, there was a proposal that could complicate it. I wasn't going to hand him either one without a conversation. The question was whether I could bring myself to listen to a man I'd once allowed to tell the story of someone else's work as though it belonged to him alone.

Chapter 1 - Terms That Were Never in the Contract

The following morning, Kraków smelled of wet stone and coffee bought in a hurry. I arrived at the festival centre earlier than I had planned because I hated beginning important conversations by apologising for being five minutes late. I had two meetings ahead of me. The first was with a producer who might offer me the opportunity to independently edit a feature-length documentary. The second was with Rufin Gaj, a man whose name should no longer have any influence over my professional decisions. At least, that was what I kept telling myself as I walked past the glass doors leading to the screening room.

I hadn't replied to his message. Not because I couldn't find the right words, but because I had no intention of negotiating over the phone with someone who hadn't even explained what he expected from me. At nine thirty, I had forty minutes free. That was all I could give him. Not a minute more.

I found him in a small workshop room on the first floor. He was sitting at a table covered with a black cloth, in front of a laptop and two cups of coffee. He didn't jump to his feet when I entered. First, he closed the window displaying the footage, then pulled out the chair opposite him.

"Paloma Lis."

"Rufin Gaj."

"I'm glad you came."

"I haven't decided whether that's a good thing yet."

He smiled slightly, as though he'd expected exactly that answer.

He was forty-one, although it was difficult to guess his age at first glance. He didn't look like a man trying to hold on to his youth, nor like someone particularly concerned about the passing years. His dark hair was carelessly brushed back, with a few lighter strands appearing at his temples. His shirt was open at the collar, the sleeves rolled up. I noticed his hands, too. They were steady, free of unnecessary gestures, like those of someone accustomed to handling equipment that couldn't be treated carelessly.

"Forty minutes?" he asked.

"Thirty-eight. I've reserved two minutes for leaving."

"Understood. I'll do my best not to waste a single one."

I didn't respond to the remark. I sat down, placed my laptop on the table and took out my notebook. I had no intention of pretending this was a social visit. If he wanted to work with me, he needed to understand from the beginning that I was interested in specifics.

"What film?"

He turned the screen towards me.

A photograph of a small cinema appeared on the monitor. A red façade, a faded sign, two posters in display cases. Above the entrance was the word ŚWIT. The building looked as though it had been waiting for renovation for years, although no one intended to carry it out anymore.

"The working title is The Last Screening," Rufin said. "It's a documentary about Irena Wolska. She worked as a projectionist in a small cinema in southern Poland for thirty-eight years. Now the building is going to be sold. The owner

has terminated the lease, and the last screening took place towards the end of summer. All she has left are her memories, the archive and a few months in which to decide what to do with an entire life connected to that place."

"When did you shoot it?"

"Over eight months. With breaks. We've got around forty hours of footage, archival recordings, photographs and interviews with people who used to come there."

"And what don't you have?"

He looked at the screen for a moment.

"An ending."

That was honest. He hadn't tried to tell me the film was practically finished and needed only a few cosmetic adjustments. Still, there was something in his expression suggesting that the problem was more complicated than the absence of a final scene.

"Why me?"

"I've seen your recent work. Especially Silence on the Other Side. I liked the fact that you didn't explain everything to the audience. You left room for the things your subject couldn't bring herself to say."

I hadn't expected him to know that film. It had been a small project, shown at a few festivals, and its producer had spent most of the time worrying that the footage was too quiet for an audience accustomed to rapid cuts.

"Do you know my name from that previous production, or have you actually watched the film?"

"I watched it."

"All of it?"

"Twice."

He didn't look as though he was saying it simply to persuade me. Even so, I wasn't about to treat a compliment as an argument in favour of accepting the job.

"Then you know I don't edit according to someone else's predetermined solutions."

"That's precisely why I wanted to talk to you."

I leaned back in my chair.

"Let's start with the fact that I'm not looking for work at any cost. I have a meeting about another project. If I accept your proposal, I need to know whether I'll have an actual influence on the film or whether I'll simply be editing according to instructions."

"I want you to build its structure."

"That's not an answer."

"Why not?"

"Because you can build a structure and then hand it over to five people who think they know better and want to change it. I want to know who makes the final decisions and who takes responsibility for them."

Rufin closed his laptop.

"The producer is responsible for financing and distribution. Directing and cinematography are my responsibility. I'm not going to pretend I don't have an opinion about a film I've been co-creating for eight months. But I'm not looking for someone who will simply carry out my instructions."

"And what if I decide your favourite scene doesn't work?"

"I'll want to know why."

"And if, after our discussion, I still want to remove it?"

"Then we'll have a problem to solve."

"Sounds like a promise of many unpleasant evenings."

"I'm not promising an easy collaboration."

He said it without smiling. That was precisely the answer that made me stop thinking about leaving for a moment. He wasn't trying to sell me a vision of a perfect team where everyone understood each other without speaking. He knew people had different opinions, and that working on a film sometimes meant defending decisions the other person didn't want to accept.

"Show me the footage," I said.

Rufin started the preview.

I saw Irena Wolska sitting in the last row of an empty cinema. The woman had short grey hair, a dark jumper and her hands clasped in her lap. She wasn't looking at the camera. She spoke about how, over the years, she'd come to recognise the sounds of the projector better than the sound of her own car. She remembered people coming on their first dates, children falling asleep during screenings and elderly men who always bought tickets for the same seat.

The footage was good. Not just technically. Rufin knew how to position a camera so that people didn't feel watched. I could see it in the way Irena moved her hands when talking about the cinema's former employees. She wasn't performing for the lens. She was simply speaking.

Then came a shot of the empty projection booth. The camera slowly moved along the wall, stopped on an old projector and remained there for several seconds. I heard

the sound of film being threaded through the machine, even though the image no longer showed the equipment in operation.

"Why did you leave the sound in?" I asked.

"Because it was the last time the projector worked."

"But the image was shot the following day."

"That's right."

"So the sound comes from a different recording."

"Yes."

"Does the audience know you've combined them?"

"They don't need to know everything."

I looked at him over the top of the screen.

"They don't need to know everything, but they shouldn't be misled either."

"I'm not trying to deceive anyone. I wanted to preserve the feeling that the place was still alive."

"Except it isn't alive in that way anymore. If you want to tell a story about memory, you can keep the sound. If you want to pretend the projector is still running, that's something else entirely."

He didn't answer immediately. He rewound the recording, watched the fragment again, then froze the image on the dark screen.

"I hadn't looked at it that way."

"Then it's a good thing you haven't finished the film yet."

He leaned back in his chair. For a moment, I thought he was going to defend himself, but instead he pushed the laptop towards me.

"Write that comment down. I want to keep it."

"I'm not working for you yet."

"I know."

"And I don't agree to you treating my comments as free consultancy."

"Then I'll pay you for the consultation, if we get that far."

I smiled to myself. For the first time since the conversation began, I felt I didn't have to monitor every word I said. Rufin seemed capable of accepting disagreement without lapsing into demonstrative silence, which was rarer in my industry than it should have been.

We had twenty minutes left. I asked about the producer, the budget, the planned editing schedule and the material I hadn't seen yet. He answered matter-of-factly, although he admitted that two issues hadn't been decided. The film was due to be presented at an industry meeting during the festival in six weeks. If a distributor showed interest, there would be a chance of further funding and additional projects. If not, the producer would have to decide whether it was worth investing in completing the film without any guarantee of a return.

"And what do you expect?" I asked.

"I want to finish this film before we forget why we started it."

"That sounds nice, but it's not a plan."

"I want people to see Irena, not just the story of a cinema that closed."

"Then you have to let her be more than a symbol of the end of an era."

"That's why I need you."

I fell silent for a moment. I wondered whether he really understood what he'd just said or whether he was simply using words that sounded good during a conversation about filmmaking.

"I'm not your missing ending, Rufin."

"I didn't say you were."

"But that's exactly how you're trying to present me. As the solution to a problem you created yourself."

"And you're trying to prove that I'm not allowed to expect anything from you."

"Because you haven't given me anything yet that would justify those expectations."

This time, his smile was more pronounced.

"That's fair."

I stood up, closing my notebook. I had the impression that the conversation had lasted longer than forty minutes, although my watch showed it was only nine fifty-eight.

"I'll send you a list of the materials I want to see before I make a decision."

"All right."

"Everything. Not just the scenes you've selected."

"Of course."

"And one more thing. If we discuss working together, my name goes into the documents from the very beginning. Not after the premiere, not in the acknowledgements, not in the last row of the credits."

Something changed in his expression, subtle but noticeable.

"I wasn't planning to leave you out."

"I didn't ask what you were planning."

For a moment, he looked at me without speaking. Then he nodded.

"You're right. We should establish that from the start."

"Exactly."

I picked up my bag and headed for the door. He didn't try to stop me. Only when I placed my hand on the handle did I hear his voice.

"Paloma?"

I turned around.

"I wouldn't want you to reject this project because of what happened with the previous film."

"I don't reject projects for personal reasons."

"Then that's good."

"But I remember what those end credits looked like."

He didn't answer. He didn't have to. He knew exactly what I meant.

I stepped into the corridor and only then allowed myself to take a longer breath. I had a meeting with the producer ahead of me and several questions about the new documentary written in my notebook. And yet I kept thinking about the shot of the old projector and the man who had spent eight months looking at a single story, only to find himself unable to bring it to an end.

I didn't know yet whether I wanted to work with Rufin. All I knew was that he wasn't as easy to dismiss as I'd imagined.

Chapter 2 - Beyond the Frame

My meeting with the producer took place right on time. Marta Kulesza turned out to be a direct, energetic woman who was considerably more interested in my ideas than in whether I could work through the night. We talked for almost an hour. I showed her an editing sample, explained my concept and asked about the scope of my responsibilities. I didn't get a contract yet, but I did get a promise of another meeting. That was enough to make me feel that I'd come to Kraków for something more than conversations in corridors.

In the afternoon, I returned to the hotel, put down my bag and checked my email. There was a message waiting for me from Rufin. It contained no reminders or attempts to convince me that I should make an immediate decision. He'd sent me a link to a secure folder containing the footage, a list of files and a brief note about the recording rights. At the end, he'd added: "If you'd rather see everything in one place first, I'll be at the editing suite on Józefa Street tomorrow at five. No obligations. You can come or not."

I read the message again. I liked the fact that he hadn't tried to turn an invitation into an instruction. That didn't mean, however, that I intended to agree simply because he'd behaved decently.

I opened the folder. The material was organised much better than I'd expected. Each shooting day had its own directory, the audio recordings were labelled, and the archival files were kept separate from the contemporary footage. There was none of the chaos that usually had to be untangled before anyone could even begin thinking about the film. Rufin had also prepared a document listing the

scenes, but he hadn't included his interpretation of them. He'd marked the places where, in his opinion, the footage required particular attention, leaving empty columns for my comments.

I stopped at one entry.

"Irena's conversation with her daughter — no permission to publish the excerpt."

I opened the note. It stated that Irena had agreed to have the conversation recorded but, after watching the footage, had asked for it not to be used in the film. The reason was described as a private family matter.

There was no comment suggesting that she should be persuaded. Nor was there any suggestion of using the audio without the image. It was simply information about a boundary the team was expected to respect.

I closed the file and returned to the list. It was a small detail, but an important one to me. I'd seen too many filmmakers treat the consent of documentary subjects as a formality to be dealt with before shooting, only to decide later that the interests of the film justified absolutely anything.

The following day, I went to Kazimierz. The editing suite was on the second floor of an old tenement building. The narrow staircase smelled of wood and dust, and someone had left a bicycle leaning against the wall on the landing. Rufin opened the door before I could knock a second time.

"I thought you'd be five minutes late," he said.

"Why?"

"The lift doesn't work, and the stairs are uncomfortable enough to make a person change their mind."

"I'm not someone who changes her mind because of a staircase."

"I've noticed."

He let me in. The room was small but well organised. Two monitors, comfortable chairs, a shelf full of drives and several boxes of labelled materials. By the window stood a small table with a kettle, cups and a plate of sandwiches. It didn't look like an office prepared for a client's visit. It looked more like a place where someone genuinely spent long hours and tried not to forget to eat.

"Coffee or tea?"

"Water is fine."

He handed me a glass and indicated the chair by the main monitor. He sat beside me, leaving enough space between us for both of us to work comfortably.

"Have you looked through the files?"

"Yes. You've organised them well."

"I think that's the first compliment I've heard from you."

"Don't get used to it."

He laughed quietly but didn't try to extend the joke. He started the footage from the first day of filming.

For the next hour, we watched scenes featuring Irena. I didn't comment on everything. I paused the image whenever something caught my attention, rewound when I wanted to check the woman's reaction or the moment she changed the subject. Rufin didn't try to explain what a particular shot was supposed to mean. Sometimes he added context; sometimes he was the one asking me to rewind a fragment.

In one scene, Irena was standing in front of the cinema entrance. She was talking about her last day at work, but instead of looking at the camera, she was watching a group of children crossing the street on the other side. At one point, she stopped mid-sentence and began to smile. The camera operator didn't move the camera. He let her keep looking.

"That's good," I said.

"I think so too."

"Not because she's saying something important."

"Then why?"

"Because for a moment she stops talking about the cinema closing. She starts living outside the story you're trying to tell about her."

Rufin looked at me, then back at the monitor.

"That's exactly what I was looking for."

"Then we have a similar problem. We don't want to make a film about a place, but about a person who has to decide what to leave behind."

"Or perhaps she doesn't have to leave anything behind."

"The cinema has already closed."

"But she still goes there."

"That doesn't mean she wants to remain in the past."

He ran his hand across the desk and paused the recording. I could see that he'd taken my comment seriously. He wasn't trying to win the argument, only to find something in it that might help the film.

"Do you know what worries me most about this footage?" he asked.