Don't Look for an Exit in My Eyes

To stay, sometimes they must stop running from a conversation



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INTRO

On my first morning in Brno, I woke up five minutes before the alarm and spent several seconds staring at the ceiling of my hotel room, trying to remember where I was. Then I saw the roll of printouts on the chair, the folder of material samples, and my coat draped over the backrest in a way I would never have tolerated in my own apartment. Everything fell back into place. Brno. Hotel Zora. Three weeks of preparation compressed into twenty-four hours of shooting. One chance to convince the building's owners that its modernist interior did not need to be rescued from its past. It only needed to be allowed to breathe again.

I had a plan.

A plan was always a good place to start.

By seven forty, I was already on the second floor, standing between frosted glass panels and the corridor's muted blue wall. The hotel was closed to guests during the renovation, so the silence had a weight of its own. I could hear my shoes squeaking against the terrazzo and the distant strike of a hammer somewhere in the service wing. Natural light came through the narrow windows at the end of the corridor exactly as I had anticipated. Soft, cool, enough to bring out the geometry of the place without turning it into a museum.

I moved a small armchair perhaps two inches.

"Now," I said to myself.

"Not now."

The voice came from behind me.

I turned slowly.

The man standing several yards away had a camera slung over one shoulder and a black bag resting against his leg. Tall, dark jacket, hair slightly too long for someone who clearly felt no need to apologize for taking up space. He looked about forty. His gaze went first to the armchair, then to the light, and only then to me.

That last part lasted a fraction too long.

"Excuse me?" I asked.

"If you leave it there, you'll cut off the line leading from the railing to the window."

"If I leave it there, someone might finally see that this is a hotel, not an empty object in an architecture catalogue."

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"Petra Witek?"

I disliked situations in which a stranger knew my name before I had even established who he was.

"Depends who's asking."

He came closer but stopped at a reasonable distance. Then he held out his hand.

"Albert Pawlik."

I didn't take it immediately.

I knew the name. Far too well.

Albert Pawlik had photographed several hotels that people later said looked better in his photographs than they did in real life. For an interior architect, that was a dangerous kind of compliment. I also knew his series about abandoned guesthouses on the Adriatic and his photographs of railway stations where people appeared only as blurred traces. He knew how to turn a place into a story.

The problem was that it was usually his story.

I shook his hand.

"You were supposed to be here at ten."

"I was supposed to be here at nine."

"The schedule I received says ten."

"Mine says nine."

He released my hand, but for a brief moment the warmth of his skin remained in my fingers. That irritated me more than the scheduling mistake.

I took out my phone.

"I'll check."

"You could also accept that we're both right."

I looked at him over the top of the screen.

"That sounds like the solution of someone who doesn't want to find out where the mistake happened."

"Or someone who doesn't want to waste the light investigating it."

He nodded toward the window at the end of the corridor. The sun had already shifted enough for the shadow of the frame to begin cutting across the blue wall.

He was right.

I didn't say so.

"Before you start, I need to set up three shots," I said. "Furniture, lamps, and the door signage. I want to show how the space functions."

"I want to show its rhythm."

"Rhythm doesn't pay a hotel's bills."

"Function doesn't make anyone want to walk inside either."

That should have annoyed me more. Instead, I felt that rare, slightly unreasonable curiosity that appeared whenever someone disagreed with me thoughtfully rather than simply for the pleasure of resisting.

Albert took the camera off his shoulder.

"Five minutes," he said. "Don't move anything."

"This is my arrangement."

"And this is my photograph."

"Of my project."

"Of a building neither of us designed."

For a moment, we simply looked at each other.

His eyes were calm. Not cold. That was worse. An angry person gave you something to push against. Albert looked like someone who could stand on the opposite side of a conflict without feeling the slightest need to raise his voice.

"Five minutes," he repeated.

"Three."

"Four."

"I'm not negotiating my own schedule with a photographer who shows up an hour early."

"Then three."

He gave in so easily that for a second I wasn't sure whether I had won.

I stepped back against the wall.

Albert began to work.

He didn't take dozens of photographs. First he looked. He shifted half a step, checked the height, watched how the light reflected off the railing. Once he crouched down; another time he backed up so far he nearly disappeared into an empty room. He didn't touch a single element I had arranged.

After two minutes, he walked over to the armchair.

"May I?"

That one word stopped me more effectively than his earlier confidence had.

"What?"

"Move it."

He pointed to exactly the spot we had argued about a moment before.

"Did you just ask my permission?"

"It happens."

"Rarely?"

He smiled.

This time, genuinely.

"Depends on the person."

I walked over to the armchair.

"Show me where."

He didn't move it for me. He stood beside me and traced a line over the floor with his hand.

"Here. Turn it about fifteen degrees."

I moved the chair myself.

"Like this?"

Albert looked through the camera viewfinder, then back at me.

"A little farther left."

"You said fifteen."

"I changed my mind."

"That's not a good sign."

"For the photograph?"

"For working together."

For several seconds, he said nothing.

Finally, he lowered the camera.

"I wasn't planning on working together."

The sentence sounded strange in the empty corridor.

"Neither was I."

We were supposed to prepare material for a joint exhibition about transitional spaces, but in my mind that meant a simple arrangement: I handled the space, he handled the photography, and later the curator would put everything together. No crossing into each other's territory. No unnecessary negotiations. No situation where my own result depended on a man known for taking a commission in Berlin, finishing it in Porto, and working in Tallinn a week later.

Albert raised the camera again.

"Stand over there."

"Excuse me?"

"By the window."

"I'm not part of the set."

"I know."

"Then why?"

"I want to see the scale."

"Find yourself a tripod."

He laughed quietly.

"A tripod doesn't look at me like it's compiling a list of reasons I should disappear from your project."

"It's not my project."

"Even worse. So you're doing this without ownership."

"I'm doing it because I care."

He lowered the camera.

The smile disappeared from his face, but he didn't look away.

"I know," he said.

Only that.

And yet suddenly I had the impression he had said something more. As though he had noticed not the armchair, not the blue wall, not the schedule on my phone, but me standing in the middle of it all, trying to control every variable before any of them had the chance to surprise me.

The feeling was uncomfortable.

And dangerously pleasant.

I turned toward the window, pretending I wanted to check the light.

"You have your three minutes," I said.

"They're already over."

I checked my watch.

He was right.

"Then we're done."

Albert put the camera into his bag without protesting.

"All right."

"All right?"

"You said we're done."

Again, he did something I hadn't expected. He didn't try to bargain for another minute, didn't use charm, didn't pretend he hadn't heard me. He simply accepted the boundary.

I should have remembered that.

Instead, I watched him fasten the bag.

"What now?" he asked.

I opened the folder containing the day's schedule.

"Now we do it my way."

He looked up.

"And then?"

"Then we can try yours."

"That almost sounds like a compromise."

"Don't get used to it."

I started down the corridor. After a few steps, I heard his footsteps behind me, calm and unhurried. When I stopped by the door to the former bar, Albert came to stand beside me.

Not too close.

Close enough.

"Petra?"

"Yes?"

"If we're going to argue for the next few weeks, warn me about one thing."

I looked at him.

"What?"

For a moment, he studied me without smiling.

"When you actually want me to stay in the conversation."

And that was when, instead of answering him, I thought for the first time that perhaps the hardest thing about Albert Pawlik would not be that one day he might want to leave.

It would be whether I could stop preparing a convenient exit for him myself.

Chapter 1 - The Boundaries of the Frame

The former hotel bar smelled of freshly sanded wood, dust, and coffee someone had left on the windowsill. Tall windows overlooked an inner courtyard where workers were unloading materials beneath a canvas canopy. Inside, the original brass trim along the counter had survived, along with two rows of spherical lamps and a wall covered in pale veneer. It was precisely that wall I intended to use as the background for one of the exhibition's most important photographs. Albert stopped in the doorway, looked around, and instead of commenting on the interior, turned his attention to me.

"You didn't answer my question."

I placed my folder on the counter.

"Which question?"

"When am I supposed to stay in the conversation?"

"When it's about work."

"That's a safe answer."

"A professional one."

"Those aren't always the same thing."

I took out the exhibition plan before I could say something less sensible. I had been working on this project for six weeks. The exhibition, provisionally titled In Between, was intended to show places where people stopped only briefly: hotel corridors, waiting rooms, stairwells, railway concourses. I wasn't interested in nostalgia for abandoned buildings. I wanted to show that a transitional space could also offer a sense of belonging. Hotel Zora was supposed to

be the heart of the entire story because it was undergoing a transformation without losing its character.

Albert leaned over the drawings.

"Everything is very precise."

"Thank you."

"That wasn't a compliment. Not yet."

I looked up.

"I noticed."

He moved his finger above one of the marked frames without touching the paper.

"Why is the corridor empty in every photograph?"

"Because we're showing architecture."

"And the exhibition is about the people who move through it."

"About the relationship between people and space. We don't need extras pretending to feel something."

"Agreed. But the absence of people is a decision too. And here, you're making it for the viewer."

I examined the reference photograph. An empty corridor, a blue wall, light resting on the floor. I was pleased with the composition. I knew every element and why it belonged there.

"And you'd like to bring in some random person and call it authenticity?"

"I'd like to leave room for something we haven't planned."

"There's no budget line in this exhibition for 'something we haven't planned.'"

Albert gave a short laugh, then immediately grew serious.

"Petra, I didn't come here to photograph your renderings."

I felt my fingers tighten around the edge of the folder.

"And I didn't invite you to change a project I'm responsible for."

"Which is exactly why we need to establish the terms."

Before I could answer, Klára Novotná entered the bar. She was the exhibition curator and a representative of the foundation financing the project. She had short grey hair, red-framed glasses, and the energy of a woman who had long since stopped believing in happy coincidences. She was carrying three paper cups of coffee.

"I see you've met."

"We've already established that we have different ideas," I said.

"Excellent. I was afraid you'd be too polite."

Klára handed us our coffees, then spread a printed contract across the counter. She pointed to a section highlighted in yellow.

"Yesterday evening, the foundation's board approved a change in how the exhibition will be presented. We want one shared narrative, not two separate sections. Petra is responsible for the space and the exhibition concept. Albert is responsible for the photography. The final selection of materials must be made jointly."

I read the clause twice.

"That wasn't in my version of the contract."

"We sent an addendum this morning."

"At six fifteen," I observed, checking my phone. "It's difficult to call that an agreement."

Klára didn't try to defend herself.

"You're right. I should have called yesterday. The board made its decision late, but that doesn't excuse how the information was communicated. You can refuse to sign the addendum. I do, however, have to tell you that without a shared concept, the foundation will reduce its funding for the exhibition."

It wasn't a threat.

That was precisely why it sounded worse.

For a moment, I stared at the document. My studio was small. I employed two people, and the project in Brno was supposed to open the door to larger commissions outside Poland. I didn't need patronage or special treatment. I needed an opportunity to show what we could do.

"How long do we have to decide?" I asked.

"Until noon tomorrow."

Albert set down his coffee.

"And I have a condition."

I turned my head.

"Of course you do."

"I want the right to show these places before the final arrangements are complete as well. Signs of use, imperfections, parts of the renovation. Not everything has to look like a finished product."

"The hotel is preparing to reopen. The owners won't agree to an exhibition that suggests the building is neglected."

"Then we'll show that it's changing."

"You can't decide on that message by yourself."

"I don't intend to. That's why I'm talking to you."

Klára watched us with an interest I didn't share.

"You have until tomorrow. Today, I'd like to see some test shots. No final commitments."

She left us alone.

For a while, the only sound was the hum of the ventilation.

"Did you know about the addendum?" I asked.

"I received it this morning."

"And you didn't think it was worth mentioning?"

"I wanted to see your concept first."

"That wasn't an answer."

Albert met my gaze without smiling.

"I knew you wouldn't like the change. I didn't know it hadn't been discussed with you. I should have asked."

His admission deprived me of the retort I'd been preparing.

"Yes," I said. "You should have."

"You have every right to be angry."

"I don't need permission."

"I know."

I pushed the document away. I wasn't going to make a decision while irritated. I was thirty-five, owned my own company, and had enough experience to distinguish ambition from pride.

At least, most of the time.

"Show me what you mean," I said.

Albert picked up his camera.

"Here?"

"Here."

He led me to the bar's side entrance, where a narrow service corridor lay beyond a set of glass doors. Darker rectangles remained on the wall where signs had been removed. New cables ran beneath the ceiling, and beside them hung an old lamp that hadn't yet been connected.

"This is the place you didn't want to photograph," he said.

"Because it isn't finished."

"Exactly."

He took a single photograph, then showed me the camera screen.

There was nothing spectacular about it. Light fell across an empty section of wall, and the shadow of a cable formed a thin line leading toward the door. The image had something of an unfinished sentence about it.

"It's about waiting," I said before I could stop myself.

Albert looked at me.

"Exactly."

"But without context, it looks like renovation documentation."

"Then let's give it context."

I studied the photograph again. I knew how it could be used. Not as the central image, but as part of a sequence showing the journey from an unfinished space to one that was inhabited. I even had an idea for pairing it with a detail from the restored bar.

"One photograph won't be enough," I said. "We need pairs. The same place before and after the change."

"Not every place should have that kind of ending."

"Why?"

"Because sometimes the most important thing is what happens in between."

He said it calmly. Even so, I had the impression he wasn't talking only about architecture.

We returned to the bar. I spread the plan across the counter and marked three places where his way of seeing could complement mine. Albert didn't try to take the pencil from me. He asked questions, sometimes uncomfortable ones, but always specific. When I suggested using a reflection in the glass, he immediately understood that I wasn't interested in a visual effect, but in showing two states of the same space at once.

We worked like that for almost an hour.

What surprised me most wasn't that we were different, but that we could develop each other's ideas without immediately trying to claim them as our own. Albert was patient with images and impatient with procedures. I was the opposite. When he pointed out a detail I hadn't noticed before, I felt gratitude and irritation in equal measure. When I explained the conservation restrictions to him, he listened with an attentiveness that made me want to keep talking.

At one point, our shoulders came close together above the open plan. I caught the scent of his jacket, cool air, and something faintly woody that I couldn't quite identify. He didn't move away abruptly or take advantage of our proximity. He simply pointed to another place on the drawing.

"Here, I need an hour without the renovation crew."

"I can arrange that."

"And here, I want to photograph at dawn."

"They open the hotel for us at seven."

"Dawn will be earlier."

"Then we'll need permission from security."

He looked at me with amusement.

"You really can turn a sunrise into a procedure."

"Procedures are why nobody ends up locked inside someone else's hotel overnight."

"Sounds like a story."

"Sounds like professional experience."

He smiled but didn't press me.

In the afternoon, we reviewed the test photographs on a large monitor in a makeshift office. Klára returned with a hotel representative, Mr. Dvořák, who remained silent through most of the presentation. When Albert showed the photograph of the service corridor, the man frowned.

"We don't want to show unfinished work."

I prepared to explain, but Albert spoke first.

"I understand. It's a proposal for discussion, not a final selection."

He looked at me.

He was giving me the floor.

"We want to pair this image with a photograph of the same place after the work is complete," I said. "Not as evidence of imperfection, but as a record of transformation.

We can also exclude any technical elements the owner doesn't want made public."

Dvořák considered this for a moment.

"If I can see the complete pair of photographs before approval, we can try."

Klára nodded.

"That's our first shared direction."

I didn't say that we had just found it. I didn't yet trust this collaboration enough to call it a success.

When we were alone by the monitor, Albert pushed his chair back.

"You handled that well."

"So did you."

"You sound as though it hurts."

"A little."

He laughed. This time, I didn't try to hide my smile.

Later, as the crew was finishing work, I went back to the second floor to collect the folder I'd left behind. Albert was standing by the window at the end of the corridor, checking his photographs. I stopped a few steps away.

"Are you free tomorrow at eight?" I asked.

"Depends what for."

"I want to show you a place that isn't in the exhibition plan."

He raised his head.

"Well, well."

"Don't jump to conclusions."

"I wouldn't dream of it."

He put away his camera and came closer. In the late-afternoon light, I noticed the fine lines around his eyes and a trace of tiredness I hadn't seen before.

"Petra, there's one more thing."

I waited.

"I don't want to sign an addendum that makes us jointly responsible if, in practice, we're going to fight over every image."

"Neither do I."

"Then let's agree on a rule. When one of us disagrees with a decision, the other doesn't try to push it through Klára."

"Agreed. And no making changes behind the other person's back."

For a moment, his expression grew more serious.

"Agreed."

I held out my hand. He took it, his grip warm and steady.

"That doesn't mean I'll always give in," I said.

"I hope you won't."

He released my hand slowly, without prolonging the gesture.

As I was leaving, he spoke again.

"Petra?"

I turned.

"Not once today did you try to convince me that everything was perfect."

"Because it isn't."