Laura Bellini

Every Time You Come Back

Coming back doesn't always mean knowing how to stay



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ROMANS

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INTRO

By four thirty-seven in the morning, I already knew the day was going to be a disaster. First, the bread slicer jammed. Then one of the ovens started struggling to maintain an even temperature. Finally, the flour supplier called to announce that his truck had broken down twenty kilometres outside town. I stood in the middle of my bakery, flour dusting my hands and a pencil tucked behind my ear, wondering whether it was possible to swear quietly enough not to disturb the rising dough.

A long locomotive whistle drifted through the open window at the back of the bakery. The first morning train was approaching the station. That sound had accompanied my working days for twenty-two years, yet I could still tell when a driver began braking a little too early or when a train crossed a set of points faster than usual.

For most people in Brzezinowo, the railway was a means of escaping town. For me, it was something much simpler: a reminder that everything ran according to a timetable.

And I liked timetables that people could actually keep.

"Dorota, we've got a problem," Marta announced, coming in from the storeroom.

"If it's about the flour, I already know."

"It's not about the flour."

I looked at her across the worktop.

"In that case, could you let me enjoy another moment of blissful ignorance?"

Marta didn't smile. She was thirty-two, had two children, and rarely lost her sense of humour. When she looked that serious, trouble was usually real.

"Mr Bielecki called from the station. They're starting the work on the pedestrian underpass earlier than planned. From Monday, the entrance on our side will be closed."

I put down the blade I'd been using to score the loaves.

For the past three months, I'd been planning an expansion of the bakery. I wasn't dreaming of a chain of shops or some enormous franchise. All I wanted was a small café next to the bakery, with six tables, proper coffee, and breakfasts for people catching the first train to Poznań. I'd already rented the adjoining premises, ordered the equipment, and secured approval for the bank financing.

But the most important part was our agreement to deliver fresh bread every day to the food outlet at the railway station. That contract was supposed to give my new venture a stable start.

If they closed the underpass, I'd lose the shortest route to the platforms.

"For how long?" I asked.

"They're saying six weeks."

Six weeks.

In a contractor's language, that could just as easily mean three months.

"I'll call Bielecki after seven. For now, we need to get the order delivered. How many crates are ready?"

"Nine. The tenth is about to come out of the oven."

"Get the trolley ready. I'll take them myself."

Marta studied me.

"You've got that meeting at the bank today."

"I'll be there."

"And you're supposed to meet the interior designer."

"I'll be there too."

"And when exactly are you planning to have breakfast?"

"Next week, if I can find an opening in my schedule."

This time she laughed.

I picked up the last baking tray, straightened my apron, and went back to work. I was forty-six, owned my own business, had almost finished paying off my loan, and had enough experience to know that panicking wouldn't repair a broken truck or reopen a closed underpass. I always found a solution. Sometimes it cost me a sleepless night, sometimes several extra hours of work, but ultimately everything depended on me.

It felt safer that way.

At five twenty, I pushed the trolley loaded with bread into the yard. The air smelled of wet asphalt and fallen autumn leaves. Dawn was beginning to brighten the sky above the rooftops, and the station lights flickered beyond a row of old chestnut trees. I was pulling on my gloves when I heard a car engine coming to a stop just outside the gate.

I wasn't expecting anyone.

The dark-blue estate car had registration plates from another region. The driver got out slowly, as though he wasn't entirely sure he'd come to the right address. He was tall, dressed in a dark jacket and grey sweater, and the hair at his temples had turned almost completely silver.

I recognised him before he closed the door.

Henryk Kłos.

For a moment, it felt as though the morning had stopped moving forward.

I'd last seen him seven years earlier, in this very yard. It had been winter. I remembered the snow settling on his shoulders, the paper cup of coffee in his hand, and the promise he'd never quite made aloud.

He was supposed to call when he came back.

He hadn't.

Now he stood a few steps away, car keys in hand, as though those seven years had amounted to nothing more than a walk across the street.

"Good morning, Dorota."

His voice hadn't changed. Low and calm, with that familiar hint of huskiness at the end of a sentence.

"The bakery doesn't open until six," I replied.

He glanced at the illuminated windows.

"I know. I remember."

"Then you're half an hour early."

A smile appeared on his face. Not the broad, disarming grin that used to win everyone over around a dinner table, but something smaller, more cautious.

"I thought you might need some help."

"With what?"

"The delivery. I saw Bielecki's message. I've got the morning off, so I thought..."

"You'd just turn up?"

"Yes."

"Without calling?"

He fell silent.

There was something infuriating about his refusal to make excuses immediately. He simply stood there, meeting my gaze, while I suddenly felt considerably less composed than the owner of a successful bakery ought to feel.

"I wasn't sure you'd answer," he finally said.

"You could have found out."

"You're right."

That simple admission robbed me of the sharp reply I'd been preparing.

Henryk glanced at the crates beside the door. He was fifty now, with a few new lines on his face and the hands of a man accustomed to responsibility. He used to spend hours telling me about railway routes, signals, and cities glimpsed through a locomotive window. But I loved listening to him most when he stopped talking about trains. When he described the smell of a forest after rain, or explained why he'd bought a second-hand book simply because someone had left a pressed four-leaf clover between its pages.

I'd never been able to decide whether he was a man fascinated by the world or someone running farther and farther away from his own life.

"Are you back for good?" I asked before I could stop myself.

His eyes settled on my face.

"For now, I'm working the local routes."

He hadn't answered my question.

I noticed immediately.

"So you still like giving answers that don't explain anything."

"And you still ask questions that make lying difficult."

Just then, Marta appeared in the doorway.

"Dorota, the tenth crate's ready. Oh, Mr Kłos! How lovely to see you!"

Before I could object, she greeted him warmly. Henryk asked about her children, remembering both their names and even the fact that her older daughter had once been frightened of dogs. I watched them talking and felt an unwelcome rush of warmth. He remembered little things. He always had. It was the things that truly mattered he struggled with.

"Mr Kłos could help with the delivery," Marta suggested.

"I'm sure Mr Kłos has things of his own to do," I said.

"I can take the crates in my car," he replied. "But if you'd rather manage on your own, I won't interfere."

He didn't push.

And that was the hardest part.

I checked my watch. I had twenty minutes to reach the station. In less than two hours, I was due to speak to the man whose decisions could determine the future of my new venture.

"Ten crates," I said. "No detours and no reminiscing along the way."

"Understood."

"And this doesn't mean everything's all right."

Henryk opened the boot.

"I wouldn't dream of assuming that."

He came over for the first crate. As we passed each other in the narrow doorway, he stopped to let me through. I caught the familiar scent of his aftershave mingling with the cool morning air. In seven years, I'd managed to forget many things, but not how much I'd loved his quiet presence when my entire world demanded immediate decisions.

I hadn't wanted to remember.

"Dorota?" he said softly.

I turned my head.

"What?"

"It's good to see you."

He wasn't smiling. He looked like a man who genuinely wanted me to believe him this time.

A departure signal sounded from the station. A train began moving, and for a moment the metallic rhythm of its wheels filled the space between us.

Over the past seven years, I'd built a life with no room for standing at windows, waiting, or wondering whether someone would keep his word. I had my bakery, my plans, and people who depended on me.

Henryk picked up another crate and carried it to the car.

And standing there in the cool light of the rising sun, I asked myself the question I feared most.

Could I open the door to him again, knowing how easily he had always walked away?

Chapter 1 - Terms of Return

At five fifty-eight, we were standing outside the side entrance to the railway station, and I was checking the time on my phone for the third time. Henryk was unloading the crates from the boot, showing not the slightest concern for my hurry. I watched him arrange them carefully on the trolley, making sure the fresh loaves wouldn't tip over on the uneven paving stones. He did everything at his own pace. Once, I had considered that composure one of his most attractive qualities. That morning, I was beginning to suspect it had been invented specifically to drive me mad.

"If we don't hurry, Mrs Jadzia will start calling," I said.

"There are still two minutes until she opens."

"Exactly."

"Dorota, the delivery is already outside her door. We're not going to be late."

I stared at him in disbelief.

"Do you always have to be so calm?"

"No. I once lost my wallet at Szczecin station and behaved quite irrationally for a full ten minutes."

I tried to keep a straight face, but the corner of my mouth twitched despite my best efforts. Henryk noticed immediately. He didn't comment. Instead, he opened the door, which Mrs Jadzia had just unlocked.

Our long-standing customer greeted him with an astonished exclamation before launching into questions about all the places he'd worked recently. I listened with half an ear while checking the delivery note. Henryk named the

towns and cities easily enough, but when she asked where he was living now, he merely said somewhere near the station.

I had no right to expect a more detailed explanation.

That thought did nothing to improve my mood.

Once we'd finished unloading, Mrs Jadzia stopped me beside the counter. Her little food outlet was modest in size, but it did excellent business with commuters buying breakfast before work. From January, she was planning to expand her range of sandwiches made with my bread, and that agreement formed an important part of the financial projections for my café.

"Mrs Dorota, we need to talk about the renovation," she said, lowering her voice. "An official notice came through this morning. Deliveries will have to come exclusively through the service gate on Towarowa Street."

I felt the last of my patience evaporate.

"But that's a detour halfway around town."

"I know. That's why I wanted to warn you. Starting Monday, they won't let you bring your trolley through the passage."

She took a sheet of paper from behind the counter. I read it twice, searching for even a single sentence that might give me grounds to challenge the decision.

There wasn't one.

Deliveries had to reach the loading ramp between five thirty and six. After that, the gate would remain closed for the duration of the construction work.

It meant rearranging the bakery's entire morning schedule.

"I'll speak to Bielecki," I said.

"There's not much he can do either."

"We'll see."

Henryk was waiting outside. He stood beside his car with a cup of coffee, apparently given to him by Mrs Jadzia. As soon as I emerged, he noticed the letter in my hand.

"Bad news?"

I handed it to him.

He read it without hurrying, then looked towards the railway tracks.

"There's an access road to Towarowa from the warehouses. It's not a terrible route, but you have to know where to turn."

"I don't need a guide to my own town."

"Then why are you gripping that piece of paper so tightly?"

I uncurled my fingers.

"Because I've just discovered that somebody has decided to rearrange my entire life."

"Perhaps not your entire life. Just your mornings."

"My mornings keep my business running."

Henryk handed the document back.

"Then we'd better make sure they keep running."

There was nothing patronising in his voice. He was simply being practical, but his composure irritated me all the more because he didn't seem to recognise the situation as a catastrophe.

I could already see the additional fuel costs, the need to hire a driver, and the delays that would affect all our other deliveries.

"I've got a car that could manage the route," he said after a moment. "If you need help for the first few days, we could work something out."

"I don't want a favour."

"I'm not offering a favour."

I raised my eyebrows.

"What are you offering, then?"

"A proper working arrangement. Agreed hours, responsibilities, and accountability."

He surprised me.

I'd expected something resembling the vague promises he'd made years ago, the sort that sounded reassuring until the moment you tried to rely on them. Instead, Henryk spoke as though he genuinely understood that my bakery was not somewhere he could appear and disappear whenever he pleased.

"You work for the railway," I reminded him.

"I have a duty roster. This month, most of my shifts start after seven or fall in the afternoon. I could help on certain mornings."

"And the others?"

"We'd need to arrange someone else. That's precisely why I'm not promising daily deliveries."

I studied him for a moment.

"You used to promise more."

His expression grew serious.

"I know."

For seven years, I'd imagined this conversation in a dozen different ways. Not once had I pictured us standing beside a boot full of empty bread crates, discussing a delivery schedule.

I'd always assumed I would be more decisive and he would be more eager to make excuses.

"I don't want to discuss the past here," I said.

"I understand."

"And don't treat my problems as an opportunity to renew our acquaintance."

"I won't."

He answered too quickly for me to find it particularly comforting.

We set off towards the bakery. I sat in the passenger seat with the documents on my lap. The car smelled of coffee, clean upholstery, and something faintly citrusy. There were no decorations on the dashboard, only a small notebook beside the glove compartment and a railway map folded so neatly it looked brand-new.

"Do you still write everything down?" I asked.

"Only the things I don't want to forget."

"So not much has changed."

He glanced at me briefly.

"Some things have changed a great deal."

I didn't answer.

Familiar houses passed beyond the window, followed by the hardware shop and the old pharmacy, recently taken over by the former owner's son. The town was gradually

waking up. People were opening their shutters, sweeping pavements, and hurrying to catch trains.

Everything looked perfectly ordinary.

I was the only one who felt as though someone had disturbed an object that had stood untouched on a shelf for years.

When we reached the bakery, I got out first.

"Thank you for the lift," I said.

"You're welcome."

"I'll send you the route information if I decide to accept your offer."

"All right."

I reached for the tailgate handle, but Henryk stopped me.

"Dorota, there's one more condition."

I turned sharply.

"I'm listening."

"If we're going to work together, you can't keep changing our arrangements simply because you don't like asking for help."

For a moment, I wasn't sure I'd heard him correctly.

"Are you suggesting I don't know how to run my own business?"

"I'm suggesting you run it so well that sometimes you forget you don't have to do every single job yourself."

That was not the sort of observation I'd expected.

Especially not from a man who had spent most of his adult life choosing the open road over putting down roots.

"And you can't disappear halfway through an agreement," I replied. "If you say you'll be somewhere at a particular time, you turn up. If something changes, you tell me in advance. No surprises."

Henryk met my gaze steadily.

"Agreed."

"I haven't said I'm accepting your offer."

"I know."

I closed the boot harder than necessary.

There was something dangerous about his calmness. He wasn't forcing me to defend myself, yet somehow he made me want to explain far more than I'd intended.

When he came into the bakery, Marta was arranging fresh rolls on the shelves. She greeted him warmly, then gave me a look I knew far too well.

I ignored it.

Instead, I buried myself in paperwork and phone calls, trying to recover the ordinary rhythm of my day.

At nine, I called Mr Bielecki. He confirmed that the underpass would be closed but promised to send me a detailed map showing access to the service gate.

The conversation lasted almost twenty minutes and produced no solution. All I learned was that the renovation contractor would make no exceptions for local suppliers.

"It's not a question of goodwill, Mrs Dorota," he explained. "It's about safety."

"I understand. But I have obligations too."

"That's precisely why we're giving you advance notice."

I put down the phone with the distinct impression that the phrase advance notice meant something entirely different to each of us.

Before noon, I went to the bank.

The adviser received me politely, but when I mentioned possible delays to the café's opening, she asked me to update my schedule. The financing approval remained valid, but any substantial change to the projected revenue would require additional explanation.

I left the bank carrying a folder of documents and an unpleasant weight beneath my ribs.

Over the years, I'd grown accustomed to taking responsibility for my decisions. The bakery had survived rising energy prices, the pandemic, and the period when some residents began buying their bread exclusively from discount supermarkets.

Now, for the first time in ages, I genuinely wished someone would tell me I didn't have to carry everything alone.

I allowed myself that thought for only a few seconds.

By the afternoon, I was back at the bakery.

Henryk had gone.

On my office desk lay a note he'd left with Marta.

"Towarowa gate: approach from the warehouses, second turning after the old dairy. Best to arrive before 5:20. I've checked the route. H."

Underneath, he'd drawn a simple street map.

There was no telephone number, no request to get in touch.

Just information I needed.

Marta appeared in the doorway.

"He left that for you. Said he didn't want to disturb you."

"Very sensible of him."

"Dorota."

"What?"

"He really looked as though he cared."

I folded the paper.

"About what?"

Marta shrugged.

"That's something you'll have to find out for yourself."

That evening, I sat at my kitchen table with the delivery schedule.

My house was only a few streets from the bakery, but sometimes I felt as though I practically lived at work. The sitting room contained a bookcase crammed with books, herbs grew on the windowsill, and the walls displayed photographs from trips I'd rarely found time to take in recent years.

I spread out the documents, opened my laptop, and began calculating costs.

An hour later, I had three possible solutions.

None was ideal.

The cheapest required me to supervise deliveries every morning. The most convenient would consume a significant portion of the anticipated profit.

The third involved working with Henryk.

I stared at his name in the spreadsheet and felt an entirely unreasonable surge of anger.

The man who had once walked away without an explanation had suddenly become the most practical solution to my problem.

I picked up my phone.

His number was still in my contacts, though I hadn't used it once in seven years. For a moment, I considered deleting it and finding another driver.

Instead, I wrote a message.

"We can discuss the terms of working together tomorrow at 5 p.m. At the bakery. Strictly business."

His reply arrived a few minutes later.

"I'll be there. And I'll do my best not to stray from the agenda."

I smiled despite myself.

Then he added:

"Goodnight, Dorota."

I didn't reply.

I put the phone down, but I didn't immediately return to my calculations. A late train passed beyond the window, briefly illuminating the darkened windows of the neighbouring houses.

I thought about how easy it had once been to believe another person's presence could be something natural, something that required no conditions at all.

This time, I intended to make sure every detail was covered.

I simply didn't know what frightened me more: the possibility that Henryk would disappoint me again, or the possibility that this time he might actually keep his word.

Chapter 2 - The Unwritten Rules

At four fifty-eight the following afternoon, Henryk walked into the bakery with a notebook in his hand.

He wasn't a minute late, a fact I acknowledged with reluctant approval.

He wore dark trousers, a pale shirt, and a navy jacket draped over one arm. He looked more like a man arriving for an important business meeting than a train driver who had agreed to help with bread deliveries after work.

I also noticed that he was freshly shaved.

I immediately reprimanded myself for paying attention to such details.

In my office, I'd arranged two chairs, a printed schedule, and a breakdown of costs. Beside the paperwork stood a jug of water. I had no intention of creating the atmosphere of a private meeting.

Henryk looked around the room before turning his attention to the documents.

"I see you're taking this seriously."

"I run a business, not a social club."

"I'd noticed."

He sat opposite me and opened his notebook.

"Let's start with the route," I suggested. "Deliveries have to reach the station no later than five fifty. That means leaving the bakery at around five ten. I can't move the baking schedule any earlier without rearranging the entire operation."

Henryk examined the document.

"That depends on the vehicle. Your crates fit in my estate car, but larger orders will need a van."

"I can hire a delivery van."

"Let's compare the costs. There's no point paying for a larger vehicle if a smaller one will do most days."

"I already have."

I slid the spreadsheet towards him.

He studied the figures carefully.

He didn't try to take charge of the conversation or question my calculations. He asked specific questions, occasionally suggested alternatives, and always returned to what I could realistically organise.

After fifteen minutes, I realised we were talking as easily as though we'd spent years solving similar problems together.

And that was when I did something distinctly unwise.

I began to trust him professionally.

"I can cover Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays for the next three weeks," he said, showing me his duty roster. "I have an early shift on Tuesdays and training on Thursdays. After that, my schedule changes."

"I can't make the bakery dependent on your shifts."

"Which is why you need a second driver."

"I know."

"I could help you find someone with the right qualifications and experience of this kind of delivery. But I don't want you hiring someone simply because he's a friend of mine."

I looked at him with interest.