Everything About You Stays

They can't love the present while looking only at the past



Laura Bellini

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ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski

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INTRO

The studio smelled of wet clay, coffee, and the dust that settled on the shelves despite being cleaned every day. I liked that smell. It wasn't beautiful in any obvious way. It didn't resemble perfume or freshly baked cake. It was the scent of things that had passed through someone's hands and remained in their place. That morning, more than ever, I needed the reassurance that at least some part of my world was still within my control.

On the table lay a tile bearing a fragment of an Art Nouveau ornament. A cobalt-blue branch crossed the cream-colored background, and a tiny leaf was missing from its tip. Restoring it required patience, not talent. Talent was often overrated. Patience was what allowed you to distinguish your own ambition from what an object truly needed. I had been working on the tile for three days and intended to finish it before Friday. After that, I would send the documentation to the committee responsible for awarding grants to establish a small educational workshop in the neighboring premises. I no longer wanted to spend my entire life working behind closed doors. I wanted to teach people how to look at things before deciding they were beyond repair.

The application was ready. All I needed were the photographs and the cost estimate. A folder containing the documents stood on the windowsill, beside samples of glazes and the measuring tape I had been carrying in my apron pocket for a week. My plan had sensible boundaries: no new commissions for two months, no promises made in response to someone else's enthusiasm, and no rescuing

other people's deadlines at the expense of my own. I was forty-eight years old and had enough experience to know that independence didn't simply appear on its own. You had to protect it through small, everyday decisions.

My phone vibrated on the shelf. I glanced at the screen, expecting a message from the owner of the premises. Instead, I saw Marta's name. She was the coordinator of a project we'd discussed the previous week. I instinctively put down my brush. At the time, I had no idea that a single conversation could shift everything on a table without any of the objects actually moving.

"Elwira, do you have a moment?" Marta asked when I answered.

"If it's just a moment, yes. If it's half a day, then no."

She laughed briefly. She knew me well enough not to mistake my answer for rudeness.

"It's about the album. The foundation has confirmed the funding. They want us to start work next month."

I moved the folder to make room for my coffee cup. The album was supposed to tell the stories of people who still practiced traditional crafts in small workshops along the Vistula. It was a good idea, perhaps even a necessary one. I had initially agreed to discuss it because Marta had promised it wouldn't be another publication filled with photographs of hands and captions lamenting disappearing traditions. She wanted to show contemporary craftspeople, their choices, mistakes, bills, exhaustion, and pride. I had also agreed because I wasn't entirely capable of turning down projects that might make something better. It was one of my less practical qualities.

"All right," I said. "But let me remind you that I can devote no more than two days a week to this."

"I know. And that's exactly why I'm calling now, before everything moves forward. We have a photographer."

My fingers stopped at the edge of the folder.

"Who?"

There was a brief silence on the other end. It wasn't theatrical, more the kind of pause someone makes when deciding whether to tell the truth immediately or prepare the ground first.

"Jacek Wilga."

The name should have meant nothing more than information about the man selected for the job. Over the years, I had learned to separate names from memories. Sometimes I managed it quite successfully. This time, two syllables were enough to bring back an image of a summer evening thirty years earlier: a table covered with cups, an open window, sunlight falling across the wall, and a young man looking at me as though he already knew the answer to a question I hadn't yet asked.

I didn't move. Outside, a cyclist passed by, his bell ringing with an almost brazen sense of normality.

"Do you know him?" Marta asked.

"I used to."

"Could that be a problem?"

I looked at the tile. The cobalt-blue branch ended where the missing leaf should have been. There was nothing particularly dramatic about it. The damage had a definite shape, and I knew how to restore it. People were more

difficult, especially when they remembered you from a time when you hadn't yet figured out who you wanted to become.

"I don't know," I answered honestly. "What are the terms?"

Marta began listing them: the schedule, meetings, sessions in the workshops, publication permissions, and advances for the participants. I listened and made notes on the back of a copy of the cost estimate. I didn't need the money from the album to open my new workshop, but it could cover part of the equipment costs. More importantly, the publication was going to be distributed to libraries and art schools. I wanted someone to see craftsmanship not simply as nostalgia, but as work requiring knowledge and decisions every single day.

"There's one more thing," Marta added. "Jacek has known your work for a long time. He said it's very important to him that you're included in the album."

I felt irritation before I could put a name to it. Not because he wanted me in the book. What bothered me was that his wish had been presented as an argument, as though knowing me years ago gave him the right to decide what I needed now.

"My work can be included in the album," I said. "I'll decide for myself what I want to say about it."

"Of course. Nobody wants to impose anything on you."

"Then it would be good to start with that principle."

Marta assured me she would pass the message on to Jacek. I didn't ask whether he already knew I had agreed. I didn't want my response to sound like consent to meeting him. I had agreed to consider the project, and that wasn't the

same thing. We arranged an organizational meeting for the following week and ended the call.

For a moment, I stood perfectly still, my phone in my hand. Then I placed it face down, as though that might silence not only the device but also the memory. I didn't feel regret. Regret would have been too simple a word for something that had long since stopped being a single emotion. There was curiosity I didn't want to acknowledge, and caution threaded with anger. There was also a question I couldn't quite put aside: could a man who had once understood my silence now hear what I actually had to say?

I returned to the tile. I applied a thin layer of compound to the damaged area and smoothed the edge with a small spatula. I didn't try to recreate the leaf from memory. First, I studied what remained, examined the direction of the crack, and only then chose the shape. That was how I worked. I didn't pretend the damage had never happened, but neither did I allow it to determine the fate of the entire object.

The plan for my new workshop lay on the windowsill. I pulled it closer, added the price of an extra lamp to the cost estimate, and circled the deadline for submitting the documents. My intention hadn't disappeared simply because an old name had entered its orbit. I still wanted to open the door to the neighboring premises, arrange the worktables, and show others that repairing something didn't have to mean restoring it to the shape it once had.

And yet, when I looked at my phone again, I thought of Jacek not as the photographer chosen for the album, but as the man who was about to see me for the first time in thirty years.

Would he be able to meet the woman I was now, or would he come looking for the image of me he had kept in his memory?

Chapter 1 - The Man Who Remembered Too Much

Jacek Wilga arrived at my studio seven minutes before our scheduled meeting.

I knew because I instinctively glanced at the clock when I heard the bell above the door. I didn't need to look up to recognize the way he entered. He used to have a habit of stopping on the threshold, as though he first wanted to see whether a place would accept his presence. He did exactly the same thing now. For a few seconds, he stood perfectly still before closing the door behind him.

"Good morning, Elwira."

I put my brush down on its ceramic rest.

"Good morning, Jacek."

I had prepared myself for this meeting, but I hadn't anticipated how ordinary our names would sound. Thirty years ago, we had said them differently. Back then, a single word could prolong an evening, and an ordinary greeting wasn't the beginning of a conversation so much as a promise that we would see each other again. Now there was a worktable between us, several shelves of ceramics, and an entire collection of things I had no intention of explaining at the first opportunity.

Jacek took off his coat. He was fifty-two, with grey strands at his temples and a face on which time had left more visible marks than it had on mine. He made no attempt to hide them. He was slim, moved with an unhurried ease, and his hands still looked like those of a man accustomed to holding a camera. Long fingers, short nails, a small callus on

the thumb of his right hand. I remembered it. I didn't want to remember it, but I did.

"Nothing has changed," he said, looking around the studio.

"That's not true. The tools have changed, the equipment, the electrical installation, and half the furniture."

"I meant the light."

I glanced at the tall window overlooking the side street. Pale November sunshine filtered through the glass. The light really was similar to what I remembered from years ago, but I had no intention of helping him develop that thought.

"Light changes several times a day," I replied. "That's one of its advantages."

He smiled faintly. He didn't look offended. More like someone who had accepted the first remark and decided to see whether the next would be just as sharp.

"You still don't let the other person win easily."

"I didn't realize we'd come here to compete."

"Haven't we?"

"You came to discuss the album. I came to work. I suggest we both remember the purpose of this meeting."

Jacek nodded and placed his leather camera bag on the table. He didn't open it immediately. First, he took out a notebook, several printed pages, and a thin folder containing documents. He sat opposite me, leaving enough space between us not to intrude on my working area.

"Marta sent me your comments," he said. "Two days a week, no photographs without prior agreement, and full approval of the text concerning your work."

"Those are basic conditions, not special privileges."

"I agree. I'd just like to add one thing."

I rested my forearms on the worktop.

"Go ahead."

"I don't want to make another album of portraits showing people standing beside their tools and looking into the camera. I'm interested in the process. What happens between the beginning of a job and the finished object."

"Then we're in agreement. I don't like posed photographs."

"I remember."

That single word hung between us with an ease I hadn't invited.

"People remember all sorts of things," I said. "Not all of them are useful."

For a moment, he studied me more carefully. Then he opened his notebook.

"I'd like to see how you work. Not just the finished pieces, but also the ones undergoing restoration, with missing fragments, cracks, and traces of earlier repairs."

"Provided their owners give permission."

"Of course."

"And you won't touch anything without asking."

"I'm not as careless as you think."

"I didn't say you were."

"But you thought it."

I didn't answer. Instead, I slid the draft project schedule towards him.

"The album is supposed to show contemporary craftsmanship. Not an exhibition of objects with captions explaining that people once knew how to make things by hand. I want it to include decisions, techniques, material costs, and problems that can't always be solved. This studio isn't a museum. And I'm not an exhibit."

Jacek looked at the sheet.

"I have no intention of turning you into an exhibit."

"Good."

"Although I have to admit, you have an exceptional talent for making sure the person you're talking to sits on the correct side of the table."

"It's a worktable. Everyone has their place here."

He ran a finger along the schedule, stopping at the planned chapter about ceramic conservation.

"I'd like your contribution to be one of the main features of the album."

"Why?"

"Because your work shows that craftsmanship isn't just about creating new things."

"That sounds reasonable."

"And because you've always had patience for objects other people considered beyond saving."

I didn't particularly like how easily he combined professional appreciation with personal familiarity. On the other hand, it was difficult to deny that he had a point. I worked with ceramics because I was interested in what could be saved without pretending nothing had happened. Not every missing piece could be replaced. Not every repair

should be concealed. Sometimes the most honest solution was to leave the trace visible.

"I want the photographs to show modern methods as well," I said. "Not just traditional techniques we were taught when we first started."

"We can do that."

"And I don't want captions along the lines of 'the hands of a master preserving ancient craftsmanship.' I'm not some legendary craftswoman from a folk tale."

"Then who are you?"

The question was asked calmly, but for a moment I couldn't find an answer that didn't sound like something copied from my website.

"A ceramic conservator. I run my own studio, and I intend to expand it."

"I know about your expansion plans."

"How?"

"Marta mentioned them."

"Then you also know how important they are to me."

"I do."

He closed his notebook. For a brief moment, we looked at each other without hurrying to fill the silence. I had the impression that he was trying to recognize what remained of the woman he had once known. There was nothing unusual about that. I was doing exactly the same thing, although I wasn't even willing to admit it to myself.

"I brought something," he said eventually.

He opened his bag and took out a camera. It was smaller than I had expected, professional but without an excessively

large lens. Then he reached into a side pocket and pulled out a flat envelope.

"This isn't part of the project," he explained. "I thought you might like to see it."

I didn't take it.

"What is it?"

"A photograph."

"What kind?"

"From Kazimierz. From the workshop where we met."

For a moment, I stared at the envelope as though it might contain something considerably more troublesome than a photograph. I remembered that summer, although some of its details had blurred with time. It had been hot, the studio had smelled of fired clay, and I had been eighteen, convinced that the world could be arranged according to my own design. Jacek had been a young photographer who had come to document the workshop. He was twenty-two and never parted with his camera, not even during breaks.

"You kept it?" I asked.

"A few of them."

"I didn't know."

"I never showed them to anyone."

I didn't answer immediately. Eventually, I took the envelope and slid the print out.

In the photograph, I was sitting at a potter's wheel. My hair was tied back carelessly, my sleeves were rolled up, and there was a streak of clay on my cheek. I wasn't looking at the camera. I was concentrating on a vessel whose rim I was carefully shaping. I remembered that day, although I

didn't remember the precise moment the photograph had been taken.

I was young, but I didn't look like someone waiting for another person's approval. I had my own work, my own world, and the expression of someone convinced that anything was possible as long as she could find the right tool.

"It's a good photograph," I said.

"I've always thought so."

I turned the print over. There was a date on the back.

"Why are you showing it to me?"

"Because I thought you might like to have it."

"And you?"

"I have a scan."

"That's not an answer."

For a moment, he looked as though he wanted to say something, but in the end he merely shrugged.

"I don't need two copies."

I placed the photograph on the table without putting it back into the envelope.

"Thank you. I'll think about whether I want to keep it."

He didn't try to persuade me. That, at least, was surprising. In the past, he could argue with such enthusiasm that a person began to wonder whether they had ever had an opinion of their own in the first place.

We moved on to practical matters. We discussed the number of photography sessions, the way the material would be archived, and the schedule for interviews with the other participants. Jacek suggested holding the first session

in my studio before the end of the month. I refused, explaining that I wasn't going to rearrange my planned work simply because the foundation wanted to speed up publication. I proposed another date.

He accepted it without argument.

"In that case, we'll start with documentation of your current work," he said. "No portraits."

"That's a sensible beginning."

"And we'll see what happens later."

"I don't like ambiguity in contracts."

"I'm not talking about the contract."

I looked up.

"Then what are you talking about?"

"About how we'll work together."

His voice was calm, but there was something in his expression I couldn't mistake for professional interest. It wasn't intrusive. Rather, it was cautious, as though he were testing whether he had the right to leave a little personal space between us.

"We'll see," I replied.

He gathered the documents and put them back in his bag. When he stood up, I noticed that the photograph was still on the table. He hadn't taken it with him. Nor had he asked whether he could leave it there.

"It was good to see you," he said.

"This is only the beginning of our collaboration."

"I wasn't talking about the project."

I didn't want to respond to that. Instead, I walked to the door and opened it for him.

"See you next week."

"See you, Elwira."

This time, he didn't stop on the threshold. He walked out, and I closed the door, listening for a moment to his footsteps fading down the corridor. Only then did I return to the table.

The photograph lay beside my notes. I picked it up and studied the young woman at the wheel once more. She didn't look like someone I needed to recover. She was simply part of me, just as much as the woman who ran the studio today, paid the bills, and planned the years ahead.

I slipped the photograph into its envelope and put it in the drawer where I kept my documents.

I had no intention of throwing away the past. But I wasn't going to let someone else decide which parts of it were allowed to tell my story.

That evening, while finishing work on the tile, Marta called. She wanted to know whether the first meeting had gone well.

"Professionally," I replied.

"What does that mean?"

"It means we've agreed on the schedule and the scope of the work."

"Elwira."

"Marta."

She sighed.

"All right. I won't ask."

"Thank you."

"But I have to tell you that Jacek was pleased."

"With what?"

"That you agreed."

I glanced towards the drawer where I had hidden the photograph.

"That's good. I'm pleased we managed to establish the ground rules."

After the call, I returned to work. For the next half hour, I didn't think about Jacek. At least, that was what I kept telling myself.

When I switched off the lights, I already knew our next meeting would be more difficult. Not because I couldn't talk to him. Quite the opposite. I knew his way of speaking, his pauses, the smile that appeared at the most inappropriate moments. I knew when he was joking and when he genuinely wanted something.

The problem was that I no longer knew whether I could distinguish the man I had once known from the man I remembered.

Chapter 2 - The Conditions of Closeness

Jacek called the following morning.

I hadn't expected to hear from him so soon. I was preparing my workstation for the restoration of a small bowl when his name appeared on the screen. For several seconds, I considered whether to answer immediately or wait until I had finished measuring the ingredients for the filling compound. I chose the second option. I wasn't going to interrupt my work simply because a man I had once shared my life with was calling.

I returned his call fifteen minutes later.

"Good morning," he said.

"Good morning. Has something happened?"

"No. I wanted to ask whether you might have time for a conversation today."

"We talked for almost two hours yesterday."

"Yesterday we talked about the album."

"And today?"

"About the details we didn't manage to settle. We could also go through the materials concerning the project participants."

"We don't even have all the documents yet."

"I know. I just wanted to see if we could meet somewhere outside the studio. Without a clock hanging over our heads and without your tools between us."

That last remark sounded far too casual for me to pretend I hadn't noticed it.

"The tools don't bother me."

"I'd gathered as much."

"I have time after three. But not for the entire day."

"An hour will be enough."

"We'll see."

We arranged to meet at a small café not far from the market square. I knew it well. I sometimes stopped there after shopping, although more often than not I simply bought coffee to go. I didn't want to choose a place that suggested anything more than I intended to offer. On the other hand, I wasn't going to pretend that meeting a former partner was the same as an ordinary project-team discussion.

I spent the rest of the morning working without any particular difficulty. It wasn't until I took off my apron before leaving that I realized I had chosen a shirt I hadn't worn in several weeks. It was navy blue, simple, and fitted my shoulders well. There was nothing special about that. I had no intention of changing my clothes for Jacek. I simply didn't want to go to a café wearing something covered in clay and conservation compound.

I repeated that to myself as I locked the studio.

Jacek was already waiting. He was sitting at a table by the window, an espresso cup in front of him. He wore a dark sweater and a shirt with the top button undone. He didn't look like someone who had made any special effort to prepare for the meeting, but I noticed that he had shaved more carefully than he had the previous day. When he saw me, he stood up.

"Right on time," he said.

"So are you."

"That must be a good start."

"I wouldn't draw conclusions just yet."

He smiled and pulled out my chair. The gesture was natural, without exaggerated politeness. I sat down, placed my handbag beside me, and ordered tea. Jacek offered to get me something to eat, but I declined. I wasn't hungry.

"We didn't manage to settle a few things yesterday," he began once the waitress had walked away. "I'd like us to have a clear division of responsibilities."

"Fine. I'm responsible for the technical content concerning conservation and for contacting the people who agree to make their objects available. You're responsible for photography, selecting the material, and preparing the proposed layout."

"Agreed."

"We approve the texts together, but you consult me before publishing any information about my work."

"I have no problem with that."

"And you don't photograph me without warning me first."

Jacek looked up from his notebook.

"Even if you're doing something interesting at the time?"

"Especially then."

"I understand."

"I don't want to find out later that I've appeared in a photograph I haven't even seen."

"That's fair."

He made a note. I noticed that he wasn't trying to negotiate any of my conditions. Perhaps he had expected me to be more demanding. Perhaps he had genuinely

accepted that, after thirty years, I had every right to set boundaries without having to justify each one.

"And what about a conversation about you?" he asked.

"In what sense?"

"For the album. We can't describe your work entirely through technique. We also need your story."

"I don't want an autobiography."

"I'm not suggesting an autobiography. I'd like to know how you got to where you are now."

"It's a rather long story."

"We have several weeks."

"And I don't intend to tell you everything."

"You don't have to."

I studied him. He met my gaze calmly. There was no impatience in his expression. In fact, it was precisely Jacek's calmness that had always managed to disarm me. It wasn't a lack of emotion. He had far more going on inside him than he usually showed, but he never forced other people to respond to it immediately. He knew how to listen when he genuinely wanted to hear an answer. The problem was that sometimes he decided far too quickly that he already knew what that answer would be.

"I started working with ceramics because I was fascinated by how long an object could preserve traces of the person who made it," I said. "Then I discovered that I was even more interested in what could be done once an object had been damaged. It's not about restoring its perfect appearance. It's about allowing it to continue existing and making sure the repair is honest."

"Is that why you don't like concealing the restored sections?"

"Exactly. You can't always recreate the original fragment. If we invent something to replace it, we should be able to show that."

"That's a good principle."

"Not always an easy one for clients to accept."

"Sometimes people prefer to believe nothing happened."

"And you?"

He looked at me over the rim of his cup.

"I prefer to know what happened."

"Really?"

He didn't answer immediately. He placed his cup on its saucer and rested his hands on the table.

"I wasn't always able to do that."

There was something in those words that went beyond professional observation. I had no intention of extracting a confession he hadn't offered.

"We all have periods like that," I said.

"You too?"

"Of course. But not everything has to find its way into the album."

He laughed softly.

"You can still close a door with a single sentence."

"It's a useful skill."

"I know."

The waitress brought my tea. I thanked her and reached for the cup. For a moment, we sat in silence, watching