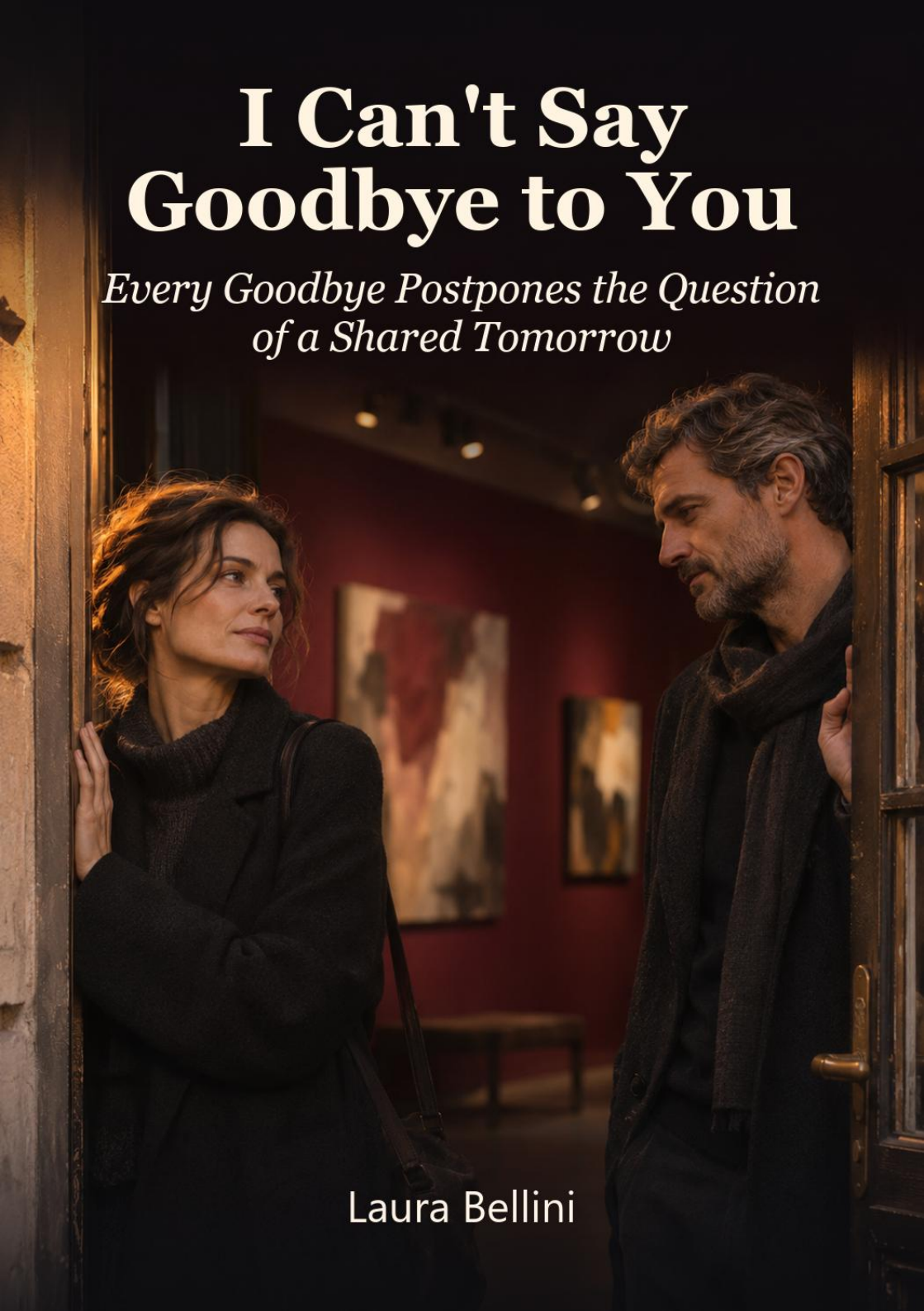
I Can't Say Goodbye to You

Every Goodbye Postpones the Question of a Shared Tomorrow



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INTRO

Toruń smelled of wet cobblestones, freshly brewed coffee, and paper that had spent years preserving other people's stories. I loved evenings like this. The city slowed down after a long day, lights shimmered in shop windows, and people who had come to the exhibition spent hours looking at posters as though each one might tell them something more than the story of the event it had once advertised.

I stood near the gallery entrance, holding a glass of white wine in one hand, with my notebook tucked beneath my arm. I was forty-one, and I had learned by then that some things had to be planned and made happen on your own if you wanted to be certain they would ever come to pass. Owning a gallery was one of them. I hadn't inherited it, received it as a gift, or owed it to some man who believed he knew better than I did how I should live my life. I had built it slowly, sometimes with a determination others called excessive and I considered necessary.

That evening, I wanted to celebrate more than a successful exhibition. The following day, I was supposed to confirm the terms of a new lease. If everything went according to plan, the gallery would gain enough space for a permanent exhibition and a small archive of Polish posters. For the first time in a long while, I wouldn't have to wonder whether I would still be in the same place a year from now. I wouldn't need to start all over again, search for another venue, or explain to a building owner why works on paper required appropriate lighting and humidity levels.

I had a plan. A specific, sensible plan of my own.

"Salomea, you should see how long people are stopping in front of that series," Marta, my colleague, said as she approached with an empty tray. "Some of them have been standing there for several minutes."

I glanced towards the wall displaying posters from the 1970s. Their colours had faded slightly, but their compositions still possessed a boldness missing from many contemporary designs.

"That's good. We didn't bring them here so people could walk past them in three seconds."

Marta smiled.

"I knew you'd say that."

"Because it's true."

I ran my finger along the edge of my notebook. Inside was a list of things I needed to take care of before closing the gallery: check the security arrangements, collect a few photographs from the photographer, confirm tomorrow's meeting time about the lease, and send a message to the printing house. By nine, I wanted to be home. I had no intention of staying late yet again simply because someone thought a gallery owner should personally supervise every glass of wine and every conversation.

That was when I saw him standing in the doorway.

At first, I didn't recognise his face. What caught my attention was the way he stood, as though he didn't want to obstruct anyone passing through, yet had no intention of turning around and leaving. He wore a dark coat, his shirt collar open, and moved with the same calmness I remembered from years ago. It was only when he raised his head that I realised who had walked in.

Bolesław Kłos.

For a brief moment, the gallery became a place belonging to another time. The conversations, the music, and the quiet clinking of glasses disappeared. All that remained was the man I hadn't seen in so long that I had grown accustomed to his absence. I hadn't forgotten him. That wasn't the same thing.

He was forty-six. His hair had turned slightly grey at the temples, and his features had become more pronounced, but his gaze was familiar. He had always looked at people as though he were listening even before they began to speak. There was an attentiveness about him that had once made it easy for me to tell him things I never discussed with anyone else.

Now I wasn't sure I could still do that.

He noticed me. He didn't wave, offer a broad smile, or immediately make his way towards me. He simply held my gaze for a moment before giving a small nod. That modest gesture was more dangerous than it had any right to be. It contained no promise, and yet it brought back memories of all those conversations that had once seemed too important to end.

I placed my glass on a nearby table.

"You never mentioned that you knew Bolesław," Marta remarked, having followed my gaze.

"I know him," I replied.

"He must be someone important."

"He used to be."

I hadn't wanted it to sound so cold. I hadn't wanted it to sound any other way, either.

Bolesław started walking towards me. On his way, he stopped in front of one of the posters. He lowered his head to examine the artist's signature, then stepped back to take in the entire composition. He still did things the same way. Details first, the whole picture afterwards. He was a book designer and could spend hours discussing margin proportions, typefaces, and why the empty space on a page could sometimes matter more than the printed words. I used to tease him about seeing the world as a double-page spread.

He would reply that I saw it like a poster, everything at once.

"Salomea," he said when he finally stood in front of me.

My name sounded perfectly ordinary in his mouth. That was precisely what made it so difficult to answer.

"Bolesław."

For a moment, neither of us spoke. Up close, I noticed the fine lines around his eyes and traces of fatigue he made no effort to conceal. He didn't look like a man who had come here by accident. He held a slim folder in his right hand, and a raindrop clung to the cuff of his coat.

"Beautiful exhibition," he said.

"Thank you. I've been preparing it for several months."

"I know."

That single word stopped me more effectively than a question would have. How did he know? Had he been following the gallery's news? Had someone told him about it? Or had he simply seen the announcement online, like hundreds of other people?

"I wasn't expecting you," I admitted.

"I wasn't sure I'd come, either."

"That's a rather peculiar way of making decisions."

The corner of his mouth lifted slightly.

"You always thought I should make more of them."

"And you always thought you didn't have to make any as long as you could keep every door open."

His smile disappeared, but he didn't look away.

"You haven't changed all that much."

"I've changed enough to dislike remarks like that."

"Noted."

There was no irony in his voice. Something closer to caution, perhaps. For a moment, I felt tempted to ask why he had really come, but I stopped myself. I wasn't going to give him an advantage simply because he had once known me better than most people did.

"Are you just passing through?" I asked.

He glanced at the folder.

"This time, I have a specific reason for being here."

"I see."

I didn't. And I had no intention of pretending otherwise.

Marta appeared beside us carrying two glasses. She handed one to Bolesław and gave me a look that promised a conversation later.

"Am I interrupting?" he asked.

"This is my gallery. If you were interrupting, you'd be the first to know."

He laughed quietly. I remembered that sound, too. Not because there was anything extraordinary about it, but

because it always seemed to appear whenever I tried to be sterner than I really felt.

"Then I'll stay for a while," he said.

"The exhibition will be open for another two hours."

"I wasn't asking about the exhibition."

I looked at him more carefully. His face no longer held the carefree expression I remembered, yet he still had a way of leaving a sentence unfinished that made you want to supply the rest yourself.

"Bolesław, if you have something to tell me, you can say it now."

For a moment, he ran his thumb along the edge of the folder.

"I'd like to talk to you about a project. An album."

"An album?"

"One worth doing properly. Not just collecting images and adding captions."

I felt my evening changing direction. I didn't yet know whether this was a professional proposal or an excuse to find a reason to see me again. I didn't want to guess. I had mistaken other people's intentions for my own hopes often enough in my life.

"I have an important meeting tomorrow," I said. "And several decisions that can't wait."

"I'm not going to ask you for an answer tonight."

"Good."

"But I'd like you to at least hear what I have to propose."

I glanced at his folder, then at the people looking around the exhibition. Everything else was still moving according to

plan. The guests were talking, Marta was keeping an eye on the refreshments, and the lights above the posters brought out the shades in the paper I had chosen so carefully. My life hadn't come to a standstill just because Bolesław had walked back into it. I wasn't going to let that happen.

And yet I didn't tell him to leave.

"Tomorrow afternoon," I decided. "Three o'clock. An hour. A conversation about the album. No surprises."

"All right."

"And don't mistake that for a promise to work with you."

"I won't."

He held out his hand. I shook it, although in that brief moment I became aware of just how much I remembered about a man I barely knew in the present anymore. His hand was warm, his handshake calm, without the familiarity we had once shared. He didn't try to hold on to my hand or prolong the gesture.

"It was good to see you, Salomea."

"You too."

He turned towards the exit, and I went back to talking with one of the guests. I managed to answer two questions about the origins of a poster and recommend the exhibition catalogue before realising that I was still looking at the door.

I didn't know whether his appearance marked the beginning of something I couldn't yet name, or whether it was simply another encounter with a past that no longer had the right to influence my choices. What I did know was that tomorrow, at three in the afternoon, I would sit opposite him and listen to his proposal about the album.

I had my plans, my own place, and a life I had learned to build without waiting for anyone.

There was just one question I couldn't answer: why, when Bolesław had appeared in my world again, was it so difficult to accept that his presence might be only temporary?

Chapter 1 - Conditions That Were Never Part of the Plan

The following day, at three in the afternoon, I was already sitting in my office, with two cups of coffee on the table and the documents concerning the new lease arranged in a neat stack. The morning meeting had gone well. I had managed to negotiate the terms that mattered most to me, although the final signature would have to wait until a lawyer had reviewed a few clauses. For the first time in months, I could look towards the gallery's future without calculating how much time remained before my current lease expired. That thought alone should have been enough to put me in a good mood for the rest of the day.

And yet, every few minutes, I glanced at the clock.

Not because I was waiting for Bolesław. At least, that was what I told myself. I simply wanted to settle the matter of the album, hear the details of his proposal, and return to my own responsibilities. Our conversation the previous evening had committed me to nothing. One hour, no surprises, no promises. Those were sufficiently clear rules to leave no room for unnecessary interpretations.

At three minutes past three, the doorbell rang.

Bolesław appeared in the doorway of my office with a folder tucked under his arm and a small paper package in his hand.

"I brought something to go with the coffee," he said.

"We didn't arrange any refreshments."

"Then consider it an attempt at bribery."

"I should warn you that I'm expensive."

"I remember."

He placed the package on the small table. Inside were two little pastries from a local bakery, the same one we used to visit after spending long hours working on projects. I didn't ask whether he had deliberately remembered the place or simply happened to pass it on his way here. I didn't want to begin our meeting with a conversation about memories.

I pointed to the armchair opposite my desk.

"We have an hour."

"That should be enough, provided we don't spend it discussing the weather."

"I wasn't planning to."

He sat down, took several sheets of paper from his folder, and placed them in front of me. The first showed a double-page book spread. It wasn't an exhibition catalogue or an ordinary album of reproductions. The design had a clear concept: large photographs of posters, fragments of typography, and short texts about the artists and the circumstances in which their works had been created. On the following pages, I found a proposed division into sections and a preliminary cover design.

For a moment, I forgot that the man sitting opposite me was someone with whom I had exchanged nothing but cautious courtesies the day before.

"Is this yours?" I asked.

"Mine. For now, it's only a preliminary version."

I ran my finger along one of the spreads. He had used plenty of empty space without leaving the posters to stand alone. Each work had room to speak for itself, while the

accompanying text didn't look like something an editor had squeezed in at the last minute.

"It's good," I admitted.

"I was expecting a more extensive critique."

"Don't mistake my silence for a lack of comments. First, I want to understand exactly what you're proposing."

"An album about Polish posters, but told through the people and places that have preserved them. Not an encyclopaedia, and not a survey of the most important names. I'd like to show how posters lived beyond the designer's studio. How they found their way onto streets, into cinemas, theatres and people's homes, and eventually into private collections."

I turned to the next page. There was a photograph of a fragment of an old theatre poster, its colour scheme immediately familiar to me.

"Where did you get this?"

"From your website. It's a photograph from an exhibition you held two years ago."

"You don't have permission to use that work."

"I know. That's why it's only in the mock-up."

I raised my eyes to him.

"Good. At least you know that much."

"I haven't come here to take your posters away."

"Everyone says that until the conversation turns to reproduction rights."

He smiled, but made no attempt to defuse the tension with a joke.

"That's precisely why I'd like to work with you rather than simply use your collection. You know people who have been preserving these things for decades. You know which stories are true and which have grown into legends over time. You can distinguish a poster worth showing from one that's interesting only because someone happened to include it in a catalogue."

"And you can turn all that into a book?"

"That's something I can prove."

I didn't answer immediately. I turned through the remaining pages. It was clear he had prepared carefully. He hadn't limited himself to a few attractive examples. There was an initial thematic structure, a proposal for reproduction formats, and even space for short conversations with collectors. However, I noticed that most of the names and sources had been left blank.

"You have an idea, but you don't have the material."

"I have some of the material. What I don't have yet is a partner who can help me decide what actually belongs in it."

"So you want me to do half the work for you."

"I want us to do it together."

"That sounds much better in conversation than it does in a contract."

He rested his forearms on his knees.

"We can move straight on to the contract, if you prefer."

That surprised me. I had expected a speech about an artistic vision that would somehow justify an unclear division of responsibilities. Instead, Bolesław took another sheet from his folder. It contained a proposed division of roles. He would be responsible for the graphic design, layout and

visual editing. I would select the works, prepare their descriptions, contact their owners and verify the information. A separate clause specified that we would share equal authorship of the concept.

"Why equal authorship?" I asked.

"Because without you, it would be a different book."

"A book could be made without my help."

"It could. But it wouldn't be the book I want to make."

He said it calmly, without an exaggerated compliment or any attempt to flatter me. That very simplicity made his words harder to dismiss.

I put the sheet aside.

"There's something else. I don't want this album to become an advertisement for the gallery."

"I'm not proposing a catalogue of your business."

"I also don't want you using my contacts and then putting your name alone on the finished work."

"That's why I've included joint authorship of the concept."

"Provisionally."

"Of course. We'll agree on the details."

I walked over to the window. From my office, I could see part of the exhibition hall and the visitors who were still arriving to see the display. On the opposite wall hung the poster whose reproduction I had just examined in his mock-up. I remembered how long it had taken me to persuade its owner to lend it to the gallery. I wasn't going to risk the collectors' trust for a project whose rules hadn't even been established.

"How did you come up with the idea for this album in the first place?" I asked. "Why now?"

Bolesław studied his notes for a moment.

"I was approached about preparing a publishing concept. A small publishing house is looking for a project devoted to Polish posters. They don't want another publication built around the same names and reproductions. They're interested in something more personal, but still properly documented. I have three weeks to present a complete proposal."

"And then?"

"If they approve it, we move into production. We'll receive a budget for reproductions, editing and preparing the materials."

"We'll receive?"

"If you agree to join the project."

I studied him carefully.

"You hadn't spoken to me beforehand, and yet you've already included me in your proposal?"

"I haven't listed you as a co-author without your consent. I've left room for your contribution and indicated that the project requires a curatorial partner."

"So you haven't promised anything on my behalf?"

"No."

"Good. I don't like people making decisions for me."

"That, at least, has never been something you liked."

There was a note of old familiarity in his voice. I didn't deny it. He remembered me as a woman who could end a conversation if someone tried to take control of it. Perhaps I

was still that woman. The only difference was that I no longer had to prove to anyone that I was capable of managing my own affairs.

I returned to my desk and sat down.

"I have plans of my own for the coming months. The gallery is going to expand, I have a lease to finalise, and I'm preparing another exhibition. I can't reorganise everything around your project."

"I'm not expecting you to."

"I need a schedule. Deadlines, responsibilities and clear rules about contacting the owners of the works. I'm not going to call people and explain that the designer has just changed his mind about the concept."

Bolesław nodded.

"I understand."

"I'm not sure you do. I need someone who will be present in the work. Not just when he happens to feel like coming to Toruń."

He was silent for a moment. Then he closed his folder, although he didn't move it away from himself.

"I don't want to promise you something I might not be able to deliver."

"That's a sensible approach."

"I work in several places. I have clients in different cities, and deadlines that sometimes shift. I won't always be here."

"We can work remotely."

"We can. But I don't want to pretend I'll have regular working hours at your gallery."

I realised we had just touched on something more important than the organisation of the work. He hadn't said he didn't want to collaborate. Nor had he tried to convince me that everything could somehow be arranged. He was talking about his life as though his constant movement were a fact beyond discussion.

"I don't need you sitting here every day," I replied. "I need to know when I can count on you."

"That I can arrange."

"And you need to meet your deadlines."

"Yes."

"Even when you're in another city?"

"Especially then."

I looked at him with mild disbelief.

"You've always been good at making promises."

"And you've always been good at checking whether they hold up."

"That's one thing I intend to keep doing."

This time, his smile grew wider.

For the rest of the meeting, we focused on practical matters. We agreed that no materials would be used without written permission and that every work would be checked for provenance and condition. I suggested that the album shouldn't be a chronological survey of artistic achievements, but rather a story about how posters found their way into people's lives and why some had survived in private collections. Bolesław immediately picked up the idea and wrote it in the margin of the mock-up.

I noticed that he didn't interrupt me while I was speaking. He didn't try to correct my wording or insert his own ideas halfway through my sentences. He listened and then responded with something concrete. When I pointed out that one of the reproductions had been cropped too tightly, he immediately asked whether it would be possible to obtain a photograph of the complete original.

It was one of the qualities I had valued in him years ago. He knew how to treat someone else's observation not as an attack on his competence, but as an opportunity to make something better.

At five past four, I moved the documents aside.

"That's enough for today."

"We still have five minutes."

"Exactly. That's why I'm saying we're done. I don't intend to use every minute simply because I've reserved it."

He stood up and began gathering the sheets. However, he stopped at one of the spreads.

"I'd like you to keep this."

"Why?"

"So you can evaluate the project properly. You don't have to give me an answer today."

"I know."

He handed me the papers. Our fingers didn't even touch. Nevertheless, for a brief moment, I became aware of how little it might take for an ordinary conversation about work to begin resembling something considerably less safe.

"I'll get in touch tomorrow with a proposed schedule," he said.

"I'll send you a list of conditions concerning the materials and reproduction rights."

"All right."

I walked him to the office door. In the main exhibition hall, Marta was talking to two visitors. Bolesław stopped once more in front of one of the posters.

"This one's excellent," he said.

"I know. That's why it's hanging in the central position."

"You still don't let anyone talk you into changing your decisions."

"If they have a good argument, I do."

"And if they have a nice smile?"

"Then they'll have to try harder."

He laughed softly.

"I'll try to come up with some good arguments."

When he left, I stood by the door for a moment, watching the street. I didn't try to stop him. There was no reason to. We were supposed to discuss a project and then decide whether it was worth pursuing.

I returned to my office and looked through his mock-up once more. On one of the pages, I found a small handwritten note:

"Not everything that survived was saved by chance."

I read it twice.

I didn't know whether he had written it with the posters in mind or something else entirely. I had no intention of asking.

What I did know was that, for the first time in a long while, someone had offered me a project that didn't require me to

abandon my own plans, yet was interesting enough to make me want to think about it.

There was still one thing to establish: whether Bolesław was capable of working with someone who had no intention of arranging her entire life around his calendar.

Chapter 2 - Between the Project and Trust

The following morning, I arrived at the gallery earlier than usual. I wanted to prepare the materials for Bolesław before the first visitor arrived and check whether his proposal still seemed as interesting in the light of day. The previous evening, I had read through the mock-up again, marked several passages and made a list of questions. I hadn't found a reason to reject the project, but that didn't mean I had agreed to work on it.

On the table in the back room, I arranged three posters that could serve as a starting point for the album. Each represented a different approach to the relationship between image and text. One came from the gallery's collection, another had been entrusted to me by a private owner, and the third had been kept for years in the archive of a family connected to one of Toruń's theatres. Not all of them had complete documentation. That was precisely why I didn't want anyone photographing them before their histories had been properly checked.

Bolesław was due at ten. At nine fifty-seven, I received a message.

"I'm outside the gallery. I don't want to come in until you've finished preparing everything. Let me know when I can."

I read it with mild surprise. Most people who came to see me on professional business treated an agreed appointment time as a right to enter immediately. Bolesław clearly had no intention of doing that.