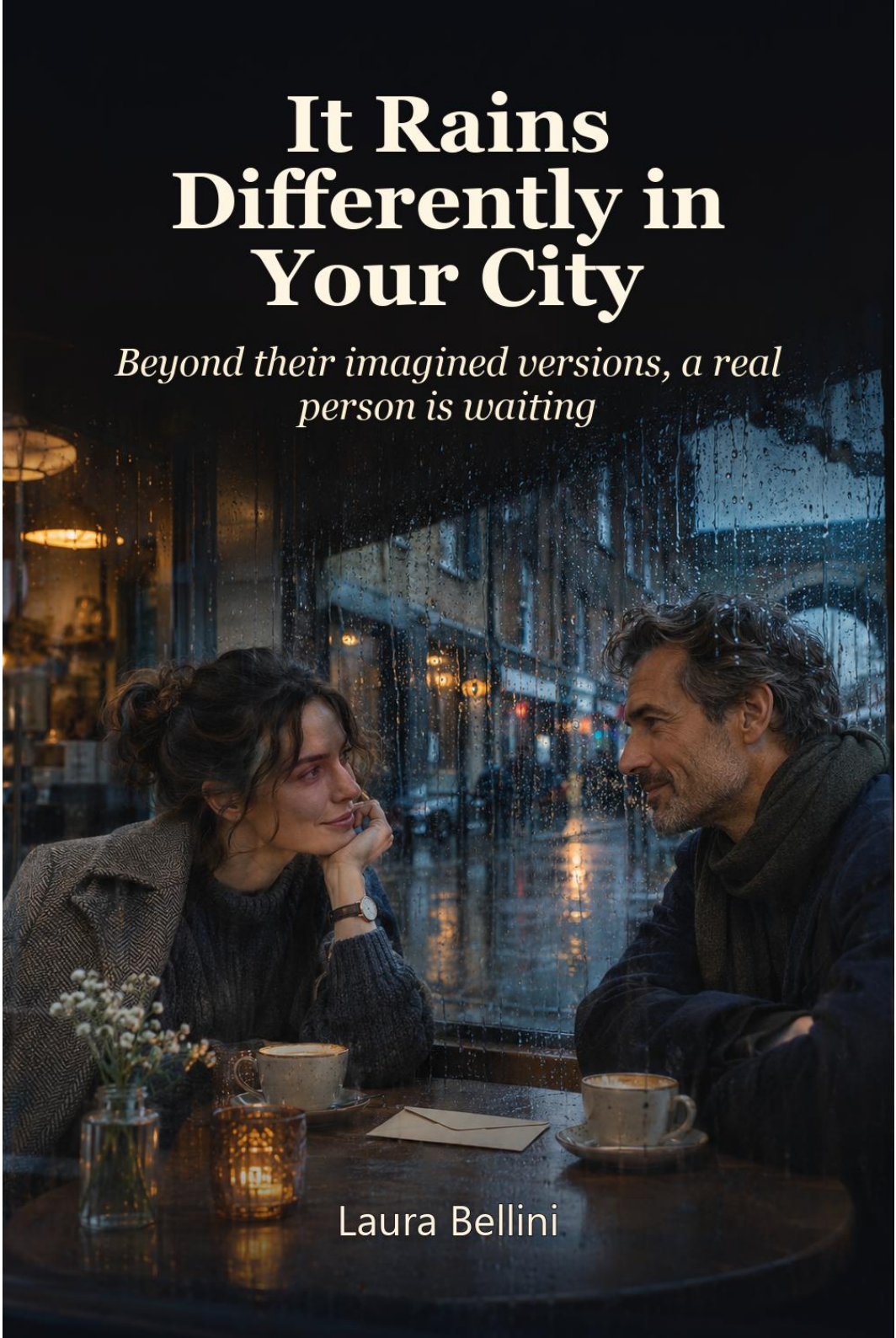
It Rains Differently in Your City

Beyond their imagined versions, a real person is waiting



Laura Bellini

It Rains Differently in Your City

Beyond their imagined versions, a real person is waiting

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384904640

ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski



TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRO 4
Chapter 1 - The Man on the Other Side of the Screen 9
Chapter 2 - Beyond the Agreed Plan..... 20
Chapter 3 - The Light Words Cannot Fix..... 33
Chapter 4 - The Things We Leave Out of Messages 43
Chapter 5 - The Right to Her Own Time 54
Chapter 6 - Before the City Fell Asleep..... 63
Chapter 7 - The Morning After the Kiss..... 72
Chapter 8 - The People Who Have Known Him for Years..... 82
Chapter 9 - What Cannot Be Replaced 93
Chapter 10 - The Place Where We Stopped Pretending 104
Chapter 11 - Not Everything Between Two People Belongs to the Night 118
Chapter 12 - The Space We Left in Our Imagination 127
Chapter 13 - The Price of Staying 139
Chapter 14 - Everything We Might Not Be Able to Save 148
Chapter 15 - The Man We Had Imagined.....159
Chapter 16 - Distance Begins Before You Leave.....171
Chapter 17 - The Life You Cannot Put on Hold.....183
Chapter 18 - Saying Sorry Is Not Enough 195
Chapter 19 - Choosing Without Illusions 206
Chapter 20 - It Rains Differently in Your City 219

INTRO

In London, rain rarely began all at once. First, the windows darkened, as though someone had passed a wet hand across the glass. Then the pavement took on a sheen, and only after a while did the drops become heavy enough for people in the street to open their umbrellas. That evening, I was sitting by the window of a small café in Bermondsey, watching passers-by make the same decision at different speeds. I had no reason to hurry. There were still forty minutes before the gallery closed, and afterwards I intended to return to my rented room, finish three exhibition captions and go to bed before midnight. My plan was simple. That was precisely why I wanted so badly to stick to it.

I had come to London for six weeks to translate the texts for an exhibition about letters written by people who had once tried to call this city their home. The work was clearly defined, the deadline tight, and the fee would be enough to rent a small space for my own studio when I returned to Poland. For years, I had been translating at the kitchen table, between bills and coffee cups that somehow never made it into the sink at the right moment. I wanted a place of my own at last, somewhere nobody would leave shopping bags on top of my printouts, somewhere I could close the door when the working day was over. I wasn't dreaming of a dramatic transformation. Something that depended entirely on me would be enough.

My laptop was open to the file containing the exhibition captions. In one of the letters, its author wrote that after arriving in England, he had spent a long time unable to distinguish homesickness from ordinary exhaustion. I had

left the sentence almost untouched. The version suggested by the curator sounded more polished, but it lost the roughness of the original. I didn't want someone else's life to become more elegant simply because it had to fit on a gallery wall.

Then a message from Tytus appeared.

"I've seen the new file. Could we talk about caption number seven? It's not working in the layout the way we thought it would."

I read it twice. There was nothing impolite about it. Tytus was rarely impolite. Over nearly two years of correspondence, I had learned to recognise his way of placing commas, the short additions he slipped at the end of messages, and the moments when he made a joke because he didn't want to say something too directly. It had started with a question about a sentence in a letter he wanted to use for a project. I replied because it was a good question. Then he sent another, and I gradually began answering more than just the questions themselves. In time, we started exchanging photographs of places neither of us knew how to describe, complaining about professional compromises and sending little messages at hours when sensible people had already finished working.

These weren't conversations in which we confessed our deepest secrets to each other every day. Sometimes we would go silent for several days, only to return with a single sentence that picked up exactly where we'd left off. Tytus could describe an empty exhibition room so vividly that I could almost hear the echo of my own footsteps. I sent him photographs of random words painted on walls and explained why certain expressions couldn't be carried into another language without losing something essential. Our

acquaintance didn't require daily presence. Or at least, that was what I had believed.

I knew he was forty-three, designed exhibitions and could spend half a day arguing about a particular shade of light if he thought it changed the meaning of an object. I also knew that he cared for his father, who lived just outside London, although he never described it as a sacrifice. He spoke sparingly about himself, but he always asked thoughtful questions about my life. He remembered when I had an important job interview and never offered reassurance before I needed it. When I turned down a commission because I thought the fee was unfair, he wrote just one sentence: "It's good that you haven't confused being needed with being available." I remembered those words longer than I cared to admit.

We had never met in person. There was an ordinary reason for that: we lived in different countries, had jobs and responsibilities, and were both remarkably good at postponing trips until a more convenient time. But now we were working on the same exhibition, in the same city, and from tomorrow onwards we would be making decisions at the same table. He had sent me a photograph of himself earlier, apparently taken without much thought, showing him in profile with a mug in his hand. He hadn't looked like someone trying to make an impression. That was precisely what had made it so easy for me to imagine the rest.

I closed the file and opened the exhibition layout attached to his message. Tytus had sent it less than an hour earlier. I had already looked at the arrangement on my screen, but only now did I notice how little space he had left for caption number seven. My sentence had been cut in half. Its meaning was still understandable, but the hesitation in the

letter writer's voice had disappeared — that small uncertainty which stopped him from sounding like someone delivering a ready-made truth.

I felt irritated, followed immediately by something less comfortable. Tytus knew how I approached translation. In our messages, he had often written that my attention to detail was precisely what he valued about me. So now, when we were finally going to work together, did he think all he had to do was ask me to be flexible and I would simply make my words fit his composition? Or had I been too quick to assume that because we had spent two years talking so effortlessly, making decisions together would come just as easily?

My phone vibrated again.

"I don't want to settle this over email. Tomorrow at nine, at the gallery. I'll show you what I mean. And just so we're clear: I'm not agreeing to the caption in its current length."

I gave a brief smile, though there was nothing amusing about it. There was something in that message I hadn't encountered before: the firmness of someone who no longer needed to choose every word carefully to keep a conversation going. For years, I could put off replying, come back to a message an hour later, and choose a sentence that wouldn't sound too sharp. Now we would be standing face to face, and there would be no chance to edit the tone before pressing send.

I replied: "I'll be there. But I can't promise I'll shorten the text."

For a moment, I stared at the cursor, as though it might add something on my behalf. It didn't. I sent the message and slipped my laptop into my bag. Outside, the rain had

grown heavier, and the car headlights stretched across the wet asphalt in long, trembling streaks. I had my own plan, a contract with the gallery and a decision I wanted to make when I returned home. I didn't need someone arriving in my life and rearranging everything for me.

And yet, as I headed towards the exit, I caught myself trying to imagine what Tytus's voice would sound like tomorrow without the mediation of a phone speaker. Not the voice I had heard in the recordings he sometimes attached to his messages, but his real voice: with its breathing, pauses and the tiredness that came after a long day. I wondered whether he, too, already had a finished picture of me, assembled from my replies, photographs and the sentences I carefully chose before sending them.

I hesitated for a moment by the door. The rain was falling harder than it had been when I entered the café. I could have gone back for my umbrella, but I didn't want to sit down at the table again and pretend that tomorrow would be an ordinary professional meeting. If we had spent two years learning how to matter to each other, could we now allow ourselves to meet without all the other things we had imagined into existence?

Chapter 1 - The Man on the Other Side of the Screen

The next morning, I woke up earlier than I had intended. Not because I had slept badly. My mind had simply decided that nine o'clock was an hour worth preparing for with particular care, as though my meeting with Tytus Król were a job interview rather than the first encounter with a man whose messages I knew almost by heart.

For several minutes, I lay in bed listening to the rain tapping against the windowsill. The previous evening had left me with the uncomfortable feeling of a conversation left unfinished. I reread his last message, even though I already knew it almost word for word. I'm not agreeing to the caption in its current length. The sentence was firm, perhaps even a little arrogant, but I couldn't bring myself to attribute bad intentions to him. Tytus had never struck me as someone who argued simply for the pleasure of winning. At least, that was the picture of him I carried in my head.

I chose dark trousers, a cream sweater and a coat that could withstand London's damp weather. I tied my hair back low, leaving a few strands loose around my face. I didn't want to look as though I had spent an hour in front of the mirror, although I had spent rather longer than necessary. Eventually, I decided that I wasn't going to apologise for my appearance or prove that the meeting meant absolutely nothing to me.

The gallery was housed in a converted industrial building on a quiet street in Bermondsey. From the front, it had tall windows and a dark metal-framed entrance. Inside, the air smelled of freshly painted walls, wood and coffee someone

had left in the back room. I arrived seven minutes early. I preferred having a moment to take in the space without other people around, especially those who might assume that my work was merely an addition to their ideas.

Printouts of letters, paper samples and several photographs were spread across a long table. I already knew some of the documents from the archive; others I had only seen on a screen. The exhibition was intended to tell the story of personal messages sent by people who had arrived in London and tried to find their place in the city. It wasn't about grand stories of emigration or official testimonies. The most important details were the small things: a description of the first rented room, a complaint about damp in a flat, a recipe copied from memory, a few sentences about someone left behind far away.

Tytus was responsible for designing how these materials would be presented. I was responsible for the translations, editing and final wording of the texts. In theory, our roles were clearly defined. In practice, the boundary between words and space proved considerably less obvious.

I heard footsteps behind me.

"Katarzyna?"

I turned around.

For a brief moment, I said nothing. The man standing a few steps away was both familiar and entirely unfamiliar. I recognised him from his photograph, but the picture hadn't captured the way he occupied a room. He was tall, with dark hair and distinct silver strands at his temples. His face showed signs of tiredness rather than any attempt to conceal his age. He wore a charcoal sweater, dark trousers and a coat draped over one forearm. He looked like

someone who had left home without giving much thought to whether his clothes matched the exhibition.

His gaze settled on me with unmistakable recognition.

"Tytus," I said, although there was no doubt about who he was.

"In my own, slightly less pixelated person."

He smiled. His voice was calm and lower than I remembered from the recordings. In person, every sentence sounded more direct. There was no screen between us, no convenient way to postpone an answer until later.

"I expected you to be taller," I said.

He raised an eyebrow.

"Interesting. I expected you to have more patience with people who shorten your texts."

"We haven't even been talking for a minute, and we're already discussing my flaws."

"Then we're making good use of our time."

I laughed, although I hadn't planned to. There was something disarming about him. His joke wasn't an attempt to dissolve the tension at any cost. It simply acknowledged that we both knew why we had arranged to meet.

Tytus put his coat over the back of a chair and gestured towards the table.

"Come on. I'll show you what I've done."

I approached the printouts. In the centre lay a large sheet showing the exhibition layout. My eyes moved across the marked walls, passageways and lighting points. The design was good. Very good, in fact. Tytus knew how to use a space without overwhelming it with elements. He had left

enough empty room, and the different sections of the exhibition formed a natural route. I had the impression that visitors wouldn't simply read the letters; they would gradually step into other people's memories.

I wasn't going to let the aesthetics overshadow the content, though.

"Here," I said, pointing to the seventh caption. "You've shortened it."

"By a third."

"By half, if you count the sentences you've removed."

"It's not about the number of sentences. It's about readability."

"Readability doesn't mean stripping a text of its meaning."

He studied me carefully. He didn't look offended. Rather, he seemed like someone who had been waiting for that answer and was curious to hear how I would justify it.

"Read it aloud," he asked.

I found the original on the printout and read the passage. The letter had been written by a woman describing her first year in London. She wrote about an apartment where the towels never dried, a neighbour who brought her tea, and how for many months she hadn't known whether she missed home or was simply exhausted from trying to find her place in somewhere new.

When I finished, Tytus didn't answer immediately.

"You see?" I asked. "This isn't a text about towels. It's about the uncertainty that exists between one sentence and the next."

"I know."

"Then why did you remove it?"

He ran his finger along the layout.

"Because people will be reading this while standing. There will be other visitors in the room, the light will fall from the side, and the passageway is narrower than it looks on the drawing. If we leave everything you want to keep, some visitors will read the first three sentences and skip the rest."

"We could increase the format."

"We can't. The panel dimensions have already been approved, and changing them would mean additional costs and delaying the installation."

"We could change the layout."

"We could, but then we'd lose space for the original documents."

"It's not my problem that you didn't design enough space."

I said it more quickly than I had intended. Tytus looked at me, then leaned back slightly in his chair.

"That is my problem, actually. That's why I'm trying to solve it."

I didn't answer. I hadn't expected him to admit that much of the disagreement was his responsibility. Usually, people in charge of a design explained its limitations as though they were laws of nature. He wasn't pretending that everything had been planned perfectly.

"I have another suggestion," he said. "Let's not decide right now between your text and my layout. We'll do a test. We'll print the full version at the intended scale, put it on the wall and see how it looks from the distance at which people will be reading it."

"And if it works?"

"We keep the full version."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Then we look for a solution that doesn't involve mechanically deleting sentences."

It sounded reasonable. That didn't mean I intended to accept his proposal without any reservations.

"I want the right to approve the final wording of every text."

"You already have that right under the contract."

"I want it to be clear in practice, too."

Tytus nodded.

"All right. I need the same thing regarding the layout. I don't want anyone changing the arrangement of the panels without consulting me once the design has been approved."

"I'm not going to design your exhibition for you."

"And I'm not going to translate your texts."

We looked at each other. There was something in that one sentence that went beyond the joke. We both had our own areas of expertise, and neither of us intended to surrender them simply because we had known each other through correspondence.

"All right," I said. "Then let's stop pretending that either of us can make every decision alone."

"That might be the most sensible decision we make today."

For the next half hour, we discussed the remaining sections. Tytus showed me the visualisations, and I explained why certain phrases needed to remain in their

original order. I noticed that he didn't interrupt when I talked about language. He didn't agree with everything, but he asked questions that genuinely addressed the problem. When I pointed out a passage that he thought didn't fit the composition, he didn't pretend to understand its meaning better than I did.

At one point, he slid a sheet of notes towards me.

"Are these your comments from the previous version?"

"Yes."

"I recognised them by the way you mark commas."

"I didn't know I had a distinctive way of marking commas."

"You do. You leave little marks in the margins, as though you're apologising to the text for having to correct it."

I looked at the page. He was right. Beside one of the paragraphs, I had drawn a tiny mark that looked like an upside-down hook.

"It's not an apology."

"Then what is it?"

"A warning."

He laughed quietly.

It was the first time I thought that his company might turn out to be more pleasant than I had anticipated. Not because he agreed with me, but because he had noticed a detail that had absolutely no significance for the project. I had spent two years writing to him about my habits, but I hadn't imagined he would remember something so small.

At eleven, a woman from the administration team entered the room. She introduced herself as Helen and informed us

that the printing company needed the final files by Friday at the latest. Tytus asked whether it would be possible to move the deadline by two days. Helen shook her head.

"Not this time. Installation starts next week. If we don't deliver the files, we'll lose our reserved slot."

"Understood," he replied.

When she left, I looked at the calendar.

"Friday?"

"Yes."

"It's Tuesday today."

"I know. You don't need to remind me."

"I'm not reminding you. I'm trying to understand why I wasn't given this information earlier."

Tytus looked at me.

"I assumed you knew the schedule."

"I know the final deadline. I didn't know there was absolutely no room for flexibility."

He was silent for a moment. Then he took a printed schedule out of his folder and handed it to me without comment.

"You're right. I should have sent you this version."

I accepted the sheet. It was a small thing, but I didn't want to dismiss it. He hadn't tried to change the subject or shift the responsibility onto the administration team.

"We're going to have to work quickly," I said.

"We're going to have to work sensibly."

"Those aren't always the same thing."

"I know. That's why it's good that you're here."

The sentence sounded different from a professional compliment. Perhaps because he said it without smiling, looking directly at me. For a moment, I didn't know what to say.

Instead, I slipped the schedule into my folder.

Before noon, we agreed that I would prepare two versions of the most problematic captions, while he would develop an alternative layout for three panels. On Friday, we would make the final decisions based on the test prints. It wasn't the compromise I had hoped for the previous evening, but at least it didn't require me to give up my professional responsibility.

As I gathered the documents, Tytus handed me the coat I had left on the chair. He did it naturally, without making a show of his courtesy.

"Do you have a moment?" he asked.

"Depends what for."

"Coffee. Not the stuff from the machine in the back room. I'd like to talk about something that doesn't fit into the schedule."

For a moment, I looked at him, wondering whether it was a professional suggestion or a personal one. I had no desire to guess.

"About what?"

"About how I imagined our first meeting. And about how wrong I was about a few things."

"That sounds dangerously close to a conversation about expectations."

"We can leave it for another time if you'd prefer."

He didn't push. He simply waited.

"Not today," I answered. "I still have work to finish, and I don't want to rearrange my plans."

"I understand."

He didn't ask whether I was sure. He didn't try to convince me that we only had a little time. He nodded and went back to gathering the printouts.

I noticed that, too.

I left the gallery a few minutes later. The rain had eased, and the air was cool and damp. I walked several dozen metres before realising I was smiling. It wasn't the smile of a woman who had just met the love of her life. I was far too sensible for that. It was more the smile of someone who had discovered that a familiar person could surprise her in a way she hadn't anticipated.

Tytus had turned out to be neither as perfect nor as difficult as I had imagined him the previous evening. He was direct, sometimes stubborn, attentive to details and confident enough not to treat every disagreement as a threat. He also had a tendency to make decisions too quickly, before making sure everyone knew the conditions.

I knew more about him than I did about most people I met in everyday life, and yet after an hour of conversation, I felt as though I had only just begun to get to know him.

A new message appeared on my phone.

"Thank you for today's conversation. And for the warning about commas. I'll be careful."

I waited a few minutes before replying.

"I can't promise it'll help."

I put my phone in my pocket and headed towards the station. For the first time since arriving in London, I thought that six weeks might turn out to be considerably less predictable than I had assumed.

Chapter 2 - Beyond the Agreed Plan

I returned to the gallery the following day at nine, this time without needing to convince myself that I was there solely because of work. I had prepared two versions of the captions, notes on the remaining texts and a list of questions about the archival materials. I wasn't going to pretend, though, that Tytus's message from the previous evening hadn't pleased me.

He arrived a few minutes after me, carrying two cups of coffee and a paper bag from the bakery across the street.

"I didn't know how you take your coffee," he said, putting the cups on the table. "So I got one black and one with milk. Neither has sugar, because I couldn't remember whether you use it."

"I usually don't."

"Then I got it half right."

"That's a pretty good result for someone who's been receiving messages from me about everything for two years."

"Not everything. You never told me what coffee you order."

"It never occurred to me that it was important information."

"Neither did it. Until yesterday."

He looked at me with a slight smile. I chose the cup with milk. I wasn't going to analyse the gesture, although somewhere in the back of my mind I registered that he had

at least remembered enough not to bring me some sweet drink loaded with syrup.

The test prints were already waiting on the table. Tytus had arranged them in the order in which they would appear on the walls. We worked almost without interruption for the next hour. My longer version of the caption turned out to be readable, but it required more space between the lines. Tytus suggested changing the typeface. I didn't like his first choice, so he prepared a second and then a third. By the time we reached the last one, I had stopped looking for reasons to object.

"This one works," I admitted.

"I know."

"You don't have to look so pleased with yourself."

"I'm not pleased. I've just been waiting all morning for you to say that."

"So you are pleased after all."

"A little."

He handed me the printout. The letters were calmer, more open. They didn't draw attention to themselves through their appearance; instead, they allowed the reader to focus on the text. I understood why he had chosen that particular typeface. He wasn't trying to decorate someone else's words. He wanted to give them room.

"Why do you design exhibitions?" I asked before I could stop myself.

He looked up.

"That's quite a personal question for nine forty."

"You don't have to answer."

"No, that's not a problem. I'm just wondering why you're asking now."

I shrugged.

"Because I can see that you know what you're doing. And in most of our conversations, you've written about your projects as though they were something you simply had to get done."

He rolled a pencil between his fingers for a moment.

"I used to think exhibition design was about showing people things. Later, I realised that what's more important is what someone might feel or remember when they encounter them. An object without context is just an object. It's the way you place it that allows someone to see something of their own in it."

"That sounds like something that belongs in your portfolio."

"I hate portfolios."

"Why?"

"Because you're supposed to show only the things you're proud of. And I don't want to pretend that all my decisions have been good ones."

He said it without any particular drama. He wasn't trying to make me feel sorry for him. He had simply decided there was no reason to present himself as a man without flaws.

"That's quite a rare attitude," I remarked.

"Maybe. But it would be much easier for me to work if I didn't have to keep remembering all the things I haven't done."

I didn't ask any further questions. I knew from his earlier messages about his father and the responsibilities that occupied a considerable part of his week. I didn't know the details, though, and I didn't want to treat that knowledge as an invitation to interrogate him.

Instead, I returned to the printouts.

"We still need to establish who approves the captions after editing."

"You do."

"And what if you want to change their position?"

"Then we'll discuss it."

"I want every change to the text after approval to go through me. Even if it's just one word."

"Agreed. I want veto power over changes to the spatial layout that affect how the exhibition is experienced."

"That's reasonable."

"Which means we've just made an agreement."

"No. We've established the rules of cooperation. The contract is somewhere in Helen's filing cabinet."

Tytus laughed and wrote down our arrangements in his notebook. His handwriting was neat, with a slight slant to the right. As he moved the page, I noticed that he had drawn a small diagram of the room in the margin, marking the passageways and lighting points.

"Do you do that automatically?" I asked.

"What?"

"Draw a plan while you're talking."

He looked down at his notebook.

"I suppose I do."

"And what about when you're talking to someone who isn't part of a project?"

"Then I draw less."

"That's reassuring."

"Why?"

"Because I wouldn't want to become another panel on your wall."

Tytus looked at me for a moment, then put his pencil down.

"You're not."

He didn't say it in a way that demanded an immediate response from me. He went back to examining the printouts, as though he had no intention of using that moment to get anything in return. Even so, his words stayed with me.

Before noon, Helen joined us and brought documents concerning the rights to reproduce the letters. She explained that some of the materials still required confirmation of consent from the authors' families. Not all the replies had arrived, and without them, we couldn't send the complete set of files to the printing company.

"How many texts are at risk?" I asked.

"Three," Helen replied. "One of them is particularly important to the final section of the exhibition."

Tytus picked up the documents and examined the list.

"Who was handling contact with the families?"

"I was, although some of the correspondence went through the archive. We can try calling again."