Laura Bellini

Teach Me to Leave More Slowly

Closeness isn't a story to publish



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ROMANS

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INTRO

The first time I saw Dawid Wicher, he was trying to photograph something he had no right to see.

He stood across a narrow street beneath an umbrella he apparently had no intention of using properly. Rain trickled down the collar of his dark coat, and he held his camera to his face with the patience of a man who could wait until the following morning for the perfect moment. In front of him, framed by the illuminated window of a small bookbinding workshop, an elderly woman bent over a book. She had no idea someone was watching her.

I stopped on the wet cobblestones.

"Please don't do that," I said in Polish.

The man lowered his camera. He had the face of someone who listened more often than he spoke, and eyes far too observant for an ordinary tourist.

"Sorry?"

"Don't take pictures of her."

He glanced back at the window.

"I'm not photographing the woman. I'm photographing the light."

"That's remarkably interesting light, considering you're pointing your camera straight at her face."

For a moment, he looked at me without speaking. Then he lowered the camera farther.

"You're right."

That surprised me. I'd already prepared several responses to the usual excuses about public spaces,

freedom of photography, and the argument that nobody was actually getting hurt. Instead, the stranger simply admitted I was right.

"I haven't taken the picture," he added.

"Good."

"Do you always stand guard over other people's windows?"

"Only when someone tries to steal a piece of another person's life through them."

A faint smile appeared on his face. It wasn't condescending or flirtatious. It was the kind of smile a man might give after hearing a sentence worth remembering.

I didn't yet know how careful I should have been around people who remembered other people's words.

That October afternoon, I was thirty-five years old, my shoes were soaked through, and I had a plan I wasn't going to change for any man.

Prague had been my home for seven years. Originally, I'd intended to stay for one season, guide Polish tour groups, and earn enough money to decide what to do next. Then came more seasons, friendships, my first private walking tours, and the gradual discovery of a city that couldn't be contained in stories about Charles Bridge, the astronomical clock, and the castle on the hill.

I loved Prague most when it stopped performing for tourists.

When the baker in Vinohrady put crates of bread outside his shop in the morning. When the owner of a secondhand bookshop in Žižkov left a bowl of water for a stray cat. When

elderly residents of Holešovice argued around a table about things nobody outside their world would understand.

For the past six months, I'd been preparing my own walking-tour project built around places like those. No major attractions, no checklist of compulsory stops, no pretending that other people's everyday lives were part of the scenery.

I'd simply called it "Prague Without an Audience."

I intended to launch the first route in November. I had preliminary agreements with three small businesses, permission from the owner of an old printing works to bring in small groups, and modest savings that were supposed to last until the end of winter. I'd already ended my permanent arrangement with a large travel agency. There was no turning back unless I wanted to return to guiding forty people a day with a little flag held above my head.

That day, I'd come to Hana's workshop to collect a restored notebook that had once belonged to my father. It wasn't particularly valuable. It contained addresses, a few sketches, and illegible notes from his travels. But it was one of the few things I had left of him.

The stranger stepped away from the window, giving me room on the pavement.

"Do you know her?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Could you ask whether she'd agree to a photograph?"

"I could. But I'm not going to today."

"Why not?"

"Because I came here for something entirely different."

I slipped a hand into my coat pocket, searching for keys that, naturally, weren't there. Instead, I found a crumpled receipt and a scrap of paper with a plumber's phone number. When I finally looked up, the man was still standing beside me.

"You're not going to give up, are you?" I asked.

"I've already given up on the photograph."

"But not the conversation."

"The conversation seems more interesting."

I studied him more closely. He looked about forty. Dark hair, slightly damp at the temples, several days' worth of stubble, and the hands of someone accustomed to carrying equipment. He made no attempt to close the distance between us. Even so, his presence was surprisingly tangible, as though the crowded little street had suddenly grown smaller.

"Alicja," I said, before I could decide that introducing myself was unnecessary.

"Dawid."

"Nice to meet you, Dawid. Now I really do have to go inside."

"Then I won't keep you."

He walked a few steps away before stopping at the corner.

"Alicja?"

I turned my head.

"That was a beautiful line. The one about stealing a piece of someone's life."

"Please don't use it."

He didn't answer immediately.

"All right," he said at last.

I didn't know why I felt the need to make certain he would take that request seriously.

Inside the workshop, the air smelled of glue, paper, and coffee that had been left on the warmer too long. Hana sat at her worktable, exactly where I'd seen her through the window moments earlier.

"Protecting me from the world again?" she asked in Czech without looking up.

"From one photographer."

"Handsome?"

"Hana."

"That's not an answer."

She removed her glasses and handed me a small notebook bound in dark green cloth. I ran my finger along its spine. The repair was almost invisible, although I knew how much work it had taken to save the cracked pages.

"It's beautiful," I said.

"It was beautiful before. Now it can simply last a little longer."

I paid her, despite her attempts to lower the price, and slipped the notebook into my bag. When I told her about the final preparations for my November launch, she nodded approvingly. She'd known about my plans from the beginning. She also knew that independence had cost me more than I usually admitted.

"Don't bring people here just because my workshop looks good in photographs," she said.

"I won't."

"But you can bring those who genuinely want to understand what I do."

"Those are exactly the people I want to bring."

Hana smiled and returned to her work.

As I left, I looked at the window once more. The light really was beautiful. Warm and honey-colored, spilling across old tools and stacks of paper. I understood the temptation to preserve the image.

What I didn't understand was why so many people believed that admiring something automatically gave them a right to it.

Outside, the rain had grown heavier.

My phone vibrated before I could open my umbrella.

The message was from Marta, the organizer of an independent urban festival who had agreed to help promote my first walking tours.

Ala, great news. I've secured sponsorship from a magazine. The journalist is already in Prague. He wants to prepare a feature alongside your walking route. It's a big opportunity. I'll call tonight.

A name appeared beneath the message.

Dawid Wicher.

I read it twice.

Then I turned toward the corner.

He was still there, this time beneath the awning of a closed bookshop, talking on the phone. When he noticed me, he ended the call. He didn't look surprised to see me.

I approached him slowly.

"Did you know who I was?"

For a moment, he studied my face, then the phone in my hand.

"I realized when you told me your name."

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

"I wanted to finish our conversation before bringing work into it."

"You don't get to decide when I find out who I'm talking to."

He accepted the criticism without smiling. He put his camera into his bag and carefully zipped it shut.

"You're right. I should have told you."

I hadn't expected him to admit I was right again. There was something disarming about it, but something unsettling, too. Dawid gave the impression of being a man who could recognize his own mistakes, though not necessarily before making them.

"We're supposed to discuss the feature tomorrow," he said.

"Provided I agree to work on it with you."

"Of course."

He watched me with an attentiveness I'd previously found attractive. Now I could also see the professional habit behind it. Remembering details. Recording words. Searching for stories where other people saw nothing more than two strangers meeting in the rain.

"Not everything you see will be yours to use," I said.

"I know."

"And not everything I tell you, either."

"I understand."

For several seconds, we stood facing each other while rain-soaked Prague glowed beneath the yellow streetlights behind us.

"And what if you have to choose between a good story and someone's trust?" I asked.

Dawid looked at me more intently.

This time, he didn't answer straightaway.

Chapter 1 - The City That Refused to Pose

Dawid didn't answer my question about trust. Instead, he glanced toward the street, where a tram was laboriously negotiating a wet bend, then looked back at me. His silence lasted perhaps a few seconds, but that was long enough for me to regret asking such a personal question of a man I'd only just met. He had no obligation to explain his principles to me. And I had no obligation to entrust him with a project I'd spent six months developing.

"I think a good story shouldn't require someone to get hurt," he said at last.

"That's not quite an answer."

"I know. But it's the most honest one I have right now."

We said goodbye without agreeing on anything beyond the time of our next meeting. At nine the following morning, we were supposed to sit down with Marta in a café in Letná and discuss the terms of our collaboration. As I walked away, Dawid made no attempt to stop me with another question. It wasn't until I reached the tram stop that I noticed I'd been clutching my phone for several minutes, although I had no intention of calling anyone.

The next morning, I arrived at the café twenty minutes early. I claimed the largest table by the window and spread out my maps, printed schedule, and photographs of the places I wanted to include in my first walking tours. I needed a space where my arguments would look as solid as they did inside my head. For years, I'd guided people who expected their tour leader to know the answer to every question. That

morning, for the first time in a long while, I was afraid of a conversation whose outcome I couldn't predict.

Marta arrived first, bringing the scent of perfume and autumn chill in with her. She kissed my cheek, ordered a double espresso, and immediately began apologizing.

"I should have warned you sooner. Everything moved faster than I expected."

"You could at least have asked whether I wanted a journalist involved."

"I asked whether you wanted media sponsorship. You said yes."

"Sponsorship doesn't mean someone gets to write about my life."

Marta sighed. We'd known each other long enough not to pretend to possess patience neither of us actually had.

"Alicja, this is a serious opportunity. The magazine has readers in Poland, the Czech Republic, and Germany. People who might never hear about your walking tours otherwise could discover them. You probably couldn't reach that audience on your own in the next year. Nobody's asking you to discuss your private life. We only need to showcase the project."

"That's exactly what I intend to make sure happens."

When Dawid entered the café, he wasn't carrying his camera. He had a canvas bag and a small notebook. His coat was dry, his dark hair had been carefully combed back with his fingers, and his face looked less severe than it had the previous evening. He stopped when he saw the documents covering the table and raised his eyebrows.

"I see I've walked into an interrogation."

"An organizational meeting," I corrected him.

"You've prepared the evidence."

"And a list of questions."

He sat opposite me without touching the map or any of the printouts. He ordered black coffee, then turned to Marta.

"We got off on the wrong foot yesterday."

"I noticed," she replied, glancing between us.

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"Yesterday, I waited too long before telling Alicja who I was. She had every right to know sooner."

Marta clearly had no intention of investigating the details. Instead, she outlined the schedule. The festival would begin in three weeks. My first demonstration walk was planned for its second day, while Dawid's feature was supposed to appear a week beforehand. His editors expected a piece about Prague beyond the tourist trails, complete with photographs, conversations, and the writer's personal perspective.

At that last phrase, I looked up.

"Whose personal perspective?"

"Mine," Dawid answered.

"So you'll describe what you see during our walks."

"Among other things."

"What else?"

He moved his coffee cup aside, as though clearing the space between us.

"I'd like to see what the city looks like beyond your prepared route. Where people go after work, what they're

looking for, what they're trying to preserve. I don't want to produce a catalogue of picturesque places."

"Neither do I."

"Then we should be able to reach an understanding."

"Provided you understand the difference between showing someone else's world and entering it without an invitation."

He studied me for a moment. There was something calm about the way he listened that made it difficult to remain angry with him. He didn't interrupt or reach immediately for a clever response. At the same time, I had the impression he was turning every remark over in his mind, testing how useful it might be.

"I understand the difference," he said. "But I have one condition of my own. I'm not writing a feature that serves as an advertisement for your project."

Marta set down her cup.

"Dawid, nobody expects you to."

"I want us to establish that clearly. If I see something uncomfortable, or somebody tells me they don't want tourists gathering outside their home, I'm not going to leave it out simply because we're hoping for good publicity."

For the first time, I found myself genuinely interested in him. Not because I agreed with him, but because he'd refused the most convenient version of our arrangement.

"Fair enough," I said. "But you won't treat private conversations as material ready for publication without discussing it with the person involved."

"Are you asking to approve every quotation?"

"I'm asking for people to consent to participating in your feature. I'm not asking to censor your opinions."

"Those are two different things."

"That's exactly what I've been trying to explain."

The corner of his mouth twitched. Marta glanced at her watch as though she feared our negotiations might continue until the café closed.

I took out the first map. I'd marked a route through Holešovice, part of Letná, and several side streets that avoided the busiest areas. It was shorter than a traditional guided tour but required considerably more preparation. I didn't want to describe residents as though they were part of a stage set. I wanted visitors to understand what it meant to live in a city that someone was almost always watching.

Dawid studied the map in silence for several minutes.

"Why isn't the old market included?" he asked.

"Because not all the vendors want organized groups coming through. I've spoken to them."

"What if the two of us went there without a group?"

"Why?"

"To find out why they don't want tourists."

"I already know why."

"You know. I don't. Not yet."

His answer irritated me more than it should have. Yet he wasn't being insolent. He simply treated my convictions as a starting point rather than conclusive evidence.

"I'm not taking you to people who've already said no," I told him.

"I'm not asking you to introduce me to them. I'm asking whether we can look at the place and discuss your decision."

That was reasonable. Reluctantly, I made a small mark beside the market.

"We can see it from outside."

"Fair compromise."

Marta breathed a sigh of relief.

We spent the next half hour discussing the schedule. I wanted to walk the entire route with Dawid so he'd understand its rhythm before conducting interviews independently. He wanted to leave room for chance encounters. Eventually, he suggested that on the first day he'd follow my planned itinerary, and on the second I'd show him the places I'd deliberately left out. It was a good enough suggestion that rejecting it would have meant admitting I was simply being stubborn.

"I won't always have time," I warned.

"I work too."

"You sound surprised that a tour guide might have other commitments."

"I'm more impressed that she manages to keep track of routes, residents, and journalists all at once."

"Journalists require the most supervision."

"Some of them probably do that on purpose."

Marta laughed, but I watched Dawid with growing curiosity. He wasn't making any special effort to be agreeable. He could, however, accept my teasing and return it in a way that made me smile despite my best intentions.

After the meeting, Marta had to return to the festival office. Dawid and I were left alone at the table, surrounded by maps. Outside, the sun broke through the clouds for a moment, turning the wet rooftops the color of old silver.

"Can I ask you something unrelated to the schedule?" he said.

"That depends on what it is."

"Why did you call the project 'Prague Without an Audience'?"

I folded one of the maps. The question seemed simple, but the answer involved things I rarely discussed with strangers.

"Because for years I've watched people arrive here looking for their own idea of the city. They want everything to be beautiful, old, and ready to photograph. But Prague is ordinary, too. It's tired, sometimes unpleasant. I want to show that other side without taking it away from the people who live here."

"And what do you get out of it?"

I gave him a sharp look.

"Are you asking about money?"

"I'm asking why you're willing to risk your own stability."

I hadn't expected him to notice something I hadn't mentioned. Perhaps he'd seen my meticulously recorded appointments or the handwritten corrections on every page of the schedule.

"I want something of my own," I answered. "Not another job where somebody else decides how quickly I have to speak and how many minutes people are allowed to spend looking through a window."

"Sounds as though you've been waiting a long time for that."

"Too long."

He didn't ask for details. I noticed that, too.

As we gathered the documents, one photograph slipped out from beneath the map. It showed a narrow passage between apartment buildings, with a little garden visible beyond a gate. Dawid picked up the photograph and handed it to me without comment.

"You don't want to take anyone there?" he asked.

"It's a private courtyard. The owner sometimes lets me in, but not with groups."

"And yet you've included it in your materials."

"Because it reminds me of what I don't want to lose sight of."

He examined the photograph again.

"Can I ask what's behind the gate?"

"A garden, three old chairs, and a man who doesn't like talking to strangers."

"Sounds like a wonderful place to live."

There wasn't a trace of irony in his voice. For a moment, I felt he understood something I didn't need to explain.

We left together. The pavement was crowded, and the morning wind carried the smell of wet leaves. Dawid stood beside me without intruding on the distance I was deliberately maintaining.

"Tomorrow at nine?" he asked.

"Nine. No being late."

"Without the camera?"

I considered that.

"Bring the camera. But ask first."

"Agreed."

I was heading toward the tram stop when I heard his voice.

"Alicja."

I turned.

"I didn't answer your question very well yesterday."

"I know."

"Not because I didn't take it seriously."

I waited.

"Because several times in my life I've been absolutely convinced I was doing the right thing, only to discover later that I was wrong."

It sounded unexpectedly personal. I didn't know whether he was talking about work or someone he'd let down. I didn't try to guess.

"Then it's good that you can at least admit it."

He nodded.

"See you tomorrow, Alicja."

On the tram, I took out my phone and opened my schedule. I moved two appointments so I'd have more time the following day to prepare the route. It was a perfectly sensible professional decision. Only afterward did I realize that, for the first time in weeks, I hadn't been thinking solely about whether my project would succeed.

I'd also been thinking about a man who hadn't tried to charm me, although he clearly wanted me to hear him out.

And about how dangerously easy it had become to look forward to our next conversation.