Three Stops from Your Home

Meeting gets easier. Talking about leaving doesn't



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ROMANS

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INTRO

If I'd caught the earlier tram that morning, I probably would never have met Adam Wilga. And if I'd never met Adam, perhaps I would still believe that the safest decisions were the ones you could make alone, without asking anyone else for their opinion.

But I was exactly four minutes late.

I stood at the stop near Wszystkich Świętych Square, holding a tube of printed illustrations under one arm and a phone in my other hand that had been reminding me of everything I hadn't done yet since six that morning. Kraków smelled of wet stone and coffee from the nearby bakery. The November light was so pale it looked as though someone had forgotten to finish illustrating the sky.

A message from Marta, my agent, glowed on my phone screen.

Luiza, I need your final confirmation by Friday. The artist residency in Copenhagen won't wait. This really is a huge opportunity.

I knew.

I was thirty-four, self-employed, had been renting the same apartment for six years, and had enough experience to know that big opportunities rarely arrived at convenient moments. For months, I'd been working on my own series of urban illustrations. The Copenhagen residency meant two months of uninterrupted work, an exhibition, and a chance to break into a market where nobody would ask whether I could make something similar, only more colorful.

I wanted to go. I really did.

And yet I couldn't bring myself to press the button confirming my participation.

Tram number eight arrived with its characteristic metallic screech. I boarded through the rear doors, squeezed between two students and an elderly gentleman carrying a shopping bag, then found a seat by the window. I rested the tube against my knees and slipped my phone into my coat pocket.

Only then did I notice the man standing opposite me.

He had dark hair, slightly too long above the collar of his navy coat, and the face of someone who felt no need to prove to the world that he was in a hurry to get anywhere. He held a book in one hand and a paper coffee cup in the other. He was reading while standing on a moving tram, with the confidence of someone who had been doing it for years.

But it wasn't his appearance that caught my attention. It was the way he closed his book when an elderly woman struggled to move a heavy bag.

Without making a performance of his courtesy, he set his cup on the wide window ledge, helped her, and returned to his reading.

I thought how rarely you met people who could be considerate without expecting gratitude.

Then the tram braked sharply.

The tube slipped from beneath my arm, struck the floor, and rolled straight toward his shoes.

"I think this is trying to escape from you," he said.

He picked it up before I could stand.

"Wouldn't be the first time. My projects have a habit of making their own decisions."

He smiled, but not the way people smile when they're already preparing their next witty response.

"Maybe they know where they want to go."

"In that case, they're smarter than I am."

He handed me the tube. I noticed a trace of blue ink on his fingers. There was also a small scar near his thumb that looked old. I registered these details out of professional habit. Illustrators observe hands, the way people stand, the distinctive lines of their faces. I told myself that was the only reason I looked at him a little longer than necessary.

"What's inside?" he asked.

"A Kraków that doesn't exist."

He raised his eyebrows.

"Sounds like quite an interesting place."

"Illustrations for an independently published art book. A city pieced together from its residents' memories. Streets shifted slightly out of place, buildings seen through the eyes of people who remember them differently from how they appear on maps."

For a moment, he studied the tube with such concentration that he seemed genuinely to be trying to picture the drawings hidden inside.

"So it's a map of what remains in people, rather than what remains in the streets?"

It was the most accurate thing anyone had ever said about my project.

Even Marta, who was brilliant at selling my ideas, usually described it as a sentimental journey through Kraków's architecture.

"Exactly," I answered, more quietly.

"I'd love to see it."

It didn't sound like a pickup line. More like genuine curiosity, which, for some reason I couldn't quite explain, felt more intimate than a compliment.

"It's not finished yet."

"The most interesting things usually aren't."

I glanced at his book. It was a collection of Bruno Schulz's short stories, badly worn, with dog-eared corners.

"You read classics on the tram?"

"I work in a library. Occupational hazard."

"And here I thought librarians would have had enough of books by the end of the day."

"Some have had enough of people. Books can be more predictable."

I laughed before I could stop myself.

That was when he looked at me differently for the first time. Not for longer, not more insistently, but with unmistakable pleasure, as though my laughter were something he'd been waiting for without realizing it.

The tram crossed an intersection. Beyond the window, rain-soaked tenement facades drifted past, followed by a florist's shopfront and a man walking a bicycle with an empty child's seat attached.

"Adam," he introduced himself.

"Luiza."

"Nice to meet you, Luiza."

I liked it when someone said my name without rushing. Adam did it so naturally that, for a moment, I wanted to hear him say it again.

His phone vibrated. He glanced at the screen and, for a fraction of a second, the easy expression left his face. I caught only the beginning of the notification: Confirmation of the date...

Instinctively, he turned the phone so the screen faced his coat.

"Sorry," he said. "Administrative matters."

"I'm familiar with that particular species of problem."

"Unfortunately, it comes in a great many varieties."

There was something in his reply I couldn't name. Not sadness or irritation. More like the weariness of a decision that had already been made.

The tram slowed.

"This is my stop," he announced, closing his book.

I felt a disproportionate sense of disappointment. We'd only been talking for a few minutes, after all. I didn't know his surname, I had no idea which library he worked at, and I had absolutely no reason to expect anything more.

"Good luck with the Kraków that doesn't exist," he added.

"And good luck with your predictable books."

He was about to leave when he glanced at the tube.

"If you ever need stories from local residents, stop by the library on Kalwaryjska Street. People leave more stories there than you'll find on the shelves."

"Is that a professional invitation?"

He hesitated so briefly that someone less observant probably wouldn't have noticed.

"For now, yes."

The doors opened. He stepped off, and I watched through the window as he buttoned his coat and headed toward the pedestrian crossing. He didn't look back immediately. Only when the tram began to pull away did he raise his head.

Our eyes met through the dirty, rain-streaked glass.

He smiled.

I smiled back.

My phone vibrated again in my pocket. Marta's message reminded me that Friday was the final deadline. I opened the residency application form. Every field had been completed. Only one confirmation remained.

I pressed my finger against the screen, but instead of confirming my departure, I opened a map of Kraków.

I checked the location of the library on Kalwaryjska Street.

Three stops from the place where I got off every afternoon.

Just three.

I put my phone away and looked at my reflection in the window. I didn't yet know whether Adam Wilga would want to see my illustrations or whether he'd remember the name of the woman with the runaway tube. All I knew was that, for the first time in many weeks, I'd found myself thinking about something other than deadlines, my project, and a plane to Copenhagen.

The tram stopped at my stop.

I could get off, return to my studio, and get on with the life I had planned so carefully.

And yet, when the doors opened, for one unreasonable second I wondered what would happen if, instead of getting off, I stayed on for another three stops.

And why did the thought of seeing a stranger again suddenly seem harder to dismiss than the journey I'd been working toward for months?

Chapter 1 - A Map of Things You Cannot Hold On To

On Friday morning, I decided I wasn't going to look for Adam Wilga.

It was a sensible, mature decision, entirely consistent with everything I'd believed until then. I had two important commissions ahead of me, an unfinished art book, and a deadline for confirming my artist residency in Copenhagen. I didn't need any additional distractions, especially ones with dark hair, a calm voice, and the ability to say one remarkably perceptive thing about my illustrations.

And yet, at nine forty, I was sitting on a tram heading toward Podgórze, a folder of sketches on my lap and a carefully prepared explanation for why I was visiting the library on Kalwaryjska Street.

The explanation was simple: I needed research materials for my project.

It was even true.

For the past two days, I'd been thinking about the idea Adam had suggested. My map of memories didn't have to be limited to drawings based on my imagination. It could include real stories from residents, fragments of writing, and places that remained invisible in ordinary guidebooks. A tenement building where someone had waited thirty years for a loved one to return. A tram stop where a woman read letters from her son every day. A courtyard where evening readings had once been held.

I had enough experience to know that a project like this required more than beautiful pictures. I needed sources,

conversations, and permission from the people whose memories I wanted to use. The library could be a good starting point.

Except that I didn't have to choose that particular library.

When I stepped inside, I was greeted by the familiar smell of paper, dust, and damp coats. Tall bookshelves divided the space into intimate little aisles, while milky light filtered through the wide windows. An elderly man was reading a newspaper at one of the tables, and two young girls nearby were leafing through a book about animals. Behind the counter sat a woman wearing glasses on a red chain.

"Good morning. I'm looking for Mr. Adam Wilga."

The woman looked up.

"Adam's running a meeting in the room at the end of the corridor. He should be finished soon. Can I help you?"

"I wanted to ask about materials relating to the history of Podgórze."

"Then you've come to the right place. Please, have a seat."

I chose a table by the window and took out my sketchbook. I had no intention of looking like a woman who had deliberately traveled three stops farther because a strange man had remembered her name. So I opened my notebook, took out a pencil, and began drawing the library interior.

A few minutes later, I heard a familiar voice.

"I knew the Kraków that doesn't exist would need a library."

I looked up.

Adam was standing beside the table with two books tucked beneath his arm. He wasn't wearing his coat. In a dark green sweater, he looked less formal than he had on the tram, and at the same time more like someone I could imagine as part of my everyday life. His sleeves were pushed up to his forearms. Blue ink still marked the side of one finger.

"Don't flatter yourself," I replied. "I came for research materials."

"Of course."

"I really did."

"I believe you. Although I get the impression you prepared that answer before you walked in."

I closed my sketchbook.

"Are you always so confident in your interpretations?"

"Only when someone looks at me as though they're considering drawing me with an exceptionally large nose."

I laughed.

Adam sat opposite me, but not before gesturing toward the chair to ask if he could. I appreciated that small courtesy more than I probably should have. Men I'd worked with in the past often treated other people's personal space as something they simply had to occupy with sufficient confidence.

"Will you show me what you're working on?" he asked.

I hesitated for a moment. My sketches weren't ready for public presentation. I usually showed them only when I could guide someone's reaction with a carefully prepared explanation. Adam, however, didn't look like a man who expected a perfect presentation.

I opened the folder.

The first illustration showed a section of Józefińska Street. The facades of the tenement buildings dissolved into lines resembling rain, while delicate outlines of former residents emerged from the windows. In the next drawing, I'd depicted a bridge from the perspective of a little girl who remembered it as something enormous and dangerous.

Adam studied the illustrations without rushing.

"Who told you the story about that bridge?"

"My grandmother. When she was little, she was afraid to cross the Vistula. She used to say the river looked as though it could swallow a person just for looking at it."

"That's a beautiful line."

"Grandma had a talent for exaggeration."

"Or perhaps for storytelling."

He turned to the next illustration.

"Do you know what I think is missing?"

I braced myself for criticism.

"Color? People? Better perspective?"

"Voices."

I looked at him.

"Sorry?"

"These places already tell stories, but the viewer only knows your interpretation. If there were short memories from local residents alongside the illustrations, the map would gain another dimension."

"That's exactly why I'm here."

"Then we've had a similar idea."

The word we sounded surprisingly natural.

Adam took a folded sheet of paper from one of the books and spread it across the table. It was a plan for a small exhibition the library was preparing. The neighborhood was marked on it, along with several landmarks and places associated with local writers.

"For months, I've been trying to organize something that takes literature beyond the shelves," he explained. "I want to create a literary map of Podgórze. Not just places described in books, but places where residents recognize their own stories. The library has an archive of recordings, memories, and old photographs. The problem is that I don't have anyone who knows how to give it a visual form."

I pulled the paper closer.

"So you need an illustrator."

"I need someone who understands that a map can show more than the way from one place to another."

He said it calmly, without trying to impress me, and yet I felt a pleasant warmth I didn't particularly want to analyze.

"And what makes you so sure I'd want to work with you?"

"I'm not sure."

"Good."

"But I do have an argument."

"I'm listening."

"I can give you access to stories you won't find on the internet."

I thought about the art book I'd been working on for months. About the pieces still missing from it. About how

badly I wanted it to become something more than a collection of aesthetically pleasing memories.

"And what do you expect in return?"

Adam didn't answer immediately.

"That the residents don't become mere decoration for your project."

I stiffened.

"I don't treat people like decoration."

"I didn't say you did."

"That's how it sounded."

"Then I phrased it badly. What I mean is that I want their voices preserved. If someone tells a story, they should know how it's going to be used. And they should have the right to say no."

I put my pencil down.

"I always ask permission."

"I believe you. But I'd like us to establish that as a principle of our collaboration, rather than leaving it to one person's goodwill."

I studied him more carefully.

He wasn't trying to win me over with a smile. Nor did he retreat from his position. He was polite but firm in a way that simultaneously irritated me and earned my respect.

"I'm not giving you control over my illustrations," I said.

"I'm not asking for it."

"And I'm not going to prepare a project that gets redesigned afterward by some library committee."

"I don't want a committee. I want a conversation."

"Conversations can last longer than committee meetings."

"Depends who you're talking to."

For a moment, we both fell silent.

That was when I noticed how light Adam's eyes were. I couldn't quite identify their color because it changed with the light, but the way he looked at people was far more interesting than the shade itself. He didn't look away when he disagreed with me.

"I have my own schedule," I said at last. "And commitments I can't postpone."

"I understand."

"That's not an excuse."

"I didn't take it as one."

My phone vibrated in my pocket. Marta.

I need your answer about Copenhagen today.

I turned the screen facedown.

Adam noticed, but he didn't ask.

"How much time would you need for a project like this?" I asked.

"I'd like to have the first version ready within six weeks. After that, we could decide whether to expand the map."

Six weeks.

Longer than I should have allowed myself to take on new commitments.

"That's a lot of work."

"Yes."

"And you're assuming I'll do it for free?"

This time, he laughed.

"No. The library has a modest budget for graphic design. I have no intention of insulting you with an offer to work for exposure."

"Well, that's a good start."

He took out a notebook and wrote down a few details. His handwriting was small, slightly slanted, with a distinctive way of forming the letter g.

"I'll send you the scope of work and the financial terms. You can take your time deciding."

"You don't have my number yet."

"That does make correspondence rather difficult."

He handed me his phone so I could enter my details. I did, trying not to pay attention to the absurd pleasure I took in such an ordinary task.

When I handed the device back, our fingers touched briefly. Neither of us pulled away dramatically or turned it into a significant event. Even so, I noticed Adam looking at my hand for a moment.

"Luiza Dąbek," he read. "A good surname for an illustrator."

"Why?"

"Short. Distinctive. Difficult to confuse with anything else."

"And Wilga?"

"Apparently, it obliges me to sing. I've been disappointing people for thirty-nine years."

"Then we have something in common. I disappoint clients when I refuse to draw smiling coffee cups."

Our conversation was interrupted by an elderly woman who approached the table carrying a stack of photographs.

"Mr. Adam, I've brought those pictures you asked for."

Adam stood up immediately.

"Mrs. Helena, thank you. Please, sit down if you have a moment."

The woman looked at me with interest.

"And who's this?"

"This is Luiza. She may be helping us show Podgórze in a completely new way."

I didn't correct him.

Mrs. Helena spread out photographs showing an old street, a shop that no longer existed, and a courtyard with a wooden bench. She told us about the people who had lived there years ago, and Adam listened as attentively as though every story mattered just as much as any book standing on the shelves behind him.

When she mentioned her husband, who had brought her flowers from the market every day, her voice trembled slightly. Adam didn't try to fill the silence. He waited until she decided for herself whether she wanted to continue.

That was when I understood why the residents' consent mattered so much to him.

It wasn't merely about professional principles.

He treated other people's memories as precious things entrusted to his care.

After Mrs. Helena left, I looked through the photographs once more.

"I want to give it a try," I said.

Adam looked up.

"Really?"

"But on my terms. I'll prepare a concept first. I'm not promising a complete project until I've seen the materials and the contract."

"Fair enough."

"And no changes to my illustrations without discussing them with me."

"Agreed."

"If I think something doesn't work, I'll say so directly."

The corner of his mouth twitched.

"I'd already started to suspect that."

I stood and gathered my sketches. I had the impression I'd spent considerably longer in the library than I'd intended. Outside, a fine rain was beginning to fall.

Adam walked me to the door.

"Luiza?"

I turned.

"Thank you for coming."

A simple sentence. No games.

"You don't know yet whether you'll regret it."

"That's true."

"You don't sound worried."

"Some risks seem worth taking."

For a moment, we looked at each other in silence. I didn't know whether he was talking about the project. I suspected he had no intention of clarifying it, either.

I stepped outside and didn't take out my phone until I'd walked a dozen or so paces.

Marta called again.

"Luiza, we have to make a decision," she said without greeting me. "The organizers need confirmation."

I looked back at the library through the rain-streaked glass of the tram shelter.

"I'm going to Copenhagen," I answered.

Saying the words brought relief. This was my opportunity, something I'd earned through years of making my own decisions, and I wasn't going to lose it simply because I'd met an interesting man.

"Excellent. I'll confirm the residency, then. I'll email you the details."

She hung up.

A moment later, a message arrived from Adam.

I'm sending you the preliminary project description. If you're still interested, I suggest we discuss it tomorrow. And I promise not to criticize your noses.

I smiled.

I replied before I had time to analyze every possible consequence.

Tomorrow works. But fair warning: my noses are non-negotiable.

His response came almost immediately.

In that case, we're starting with the difficult subjects.

I put my phone away as the tram arrived.

Ahead of me lay a trip abroad, a new project, and a man who, in the space of two meetings, had challenged more of my habits than anyone had in the past year.

I had no intention of changing my plans.

But I wanted to see what tomorrow would bring.

Chapter 2 - An Agreement Without the Fine Print

On Saturday morning, I woke before my alarm and spent several seconds trying to understand why I felt impatient. Usually, I began weekends with coffee and a review of unanswered messages, then worked until the light in my studio became too weak to distinguish shades of gray. This time, my first thought wasn't the unfinished art book or the date of my departure for Copenhagen.

It was Adam's message.

Ten thirty. The café on Józefińska Street. I have the documents, the map, and some pretty convincing arguments.

I read it again, even though I already knew it by heart.

I didn't consider myself particularly susceptible to romantic fantasies. I'd had several relationships that had taught me caution, but also that caution could eventually become a convenient excuse for refusing to let anyone into my life. For the past two years, I hadn't especially missed intimacy. I liked my apartment, my independence, and the silence in which nobody asked why I was working at two in the morning.

And yet here I was, choosing my clothes with more care than I devoted to some professional meetings.

In the end, I put on black trousers, a light-colored sweater, and a long wool coat. I left my hair loose. Not because I was trying to impress anyone. I simply felt good that way.

At least, that was what I told myself.