Who Will Say Stay First

Sharing the Work Doesn't Guarantee Sharing a Future



Laura Bellini

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INTRO

I came to the Bieszczady Mountains with three suitcases, a tube full of papers, and a plan I had no intention of changing for anyone.

At least, that was what I kept telling myself as the car climbed a narrow, rain-soaked road, each bend revealing hills that seemed increasingly distant from civilization. The rain had stopped about fifteen minutes earlier, but the tree branches were still dripping. Mist settled over the slopes, drifting slowly between dark spruce trees. Somewhere below, there had to be a stream. I couldn't see it, but I could hear its steady murmur.

The residence appeared around the final bend. An old, sprawling building with a wooden veranda, tall windows, and stone steps looked as though it had long ago stopped feeling the need to prove anything to anyone. It wasn't luxurious in the modern sense of the word. But it had something most of the places where I had worked recently were missing: a silence that didn't feel manufactured.

I parked in front of the entrance and sat there for a moment without getting out.

I had come here for several weeks to help create an art book. I was responsible for the illustrations, their composition, and the visual narrative. My job wasn't to decorate someone else's sentences. I wanted the images to have a voice of their own, rather than serve as nothing more than an elegant backdrop for the text. I had agreed to the collaboration because the project's subject was close to my heart, the conditions allowed me to maintain my

independence, and the fee would finally give me a little breathing room.

But I had another plan, too.

During my stay, I intended to prepare the first part of my own portfolio. I had been putting that project off for months, always finding something more urgent, more profitable, or demanding an immediate response. This time, I wanted to dedicate my mornings to it. No phone calls, no consultations, no revising other people's ideas. Just me, paper, and the images that had been waiting in my mind for the right moment for far too long.

The evenings were supposed to be reserved for rest.

It seemed like a sensible arrangement.

I carried the first suitcase up the steps and pressed the door handle. Inside, the air smelled of wood, coffee, and something else — perhaps old books, their spines filling the shelves in the spacious entrance hall. Photographs of the mountains hung on the walls, and a small table with a ceramic vase stood beside the staircase. Voices drifted from a room to the right, where the staff were preparing the dining room.

Before I had a chance to knock on the reception desk, I heard someone behind me.

"Ms. Aniela Żur?"

I turned around. A woman in a navy-blue sweater was holding a notebook under her arm.

"Yes. I hope I'm not too early."

"Not at all. Your room is ready. Your collaborator arrived before noon."

I didn't particularly like that word. Collaborator. It sounded harmless, but in practice it could mean anything from someone who respected clearly defined roles to someone who believed that working on a shared project gave him the right to manage someone else's work.

"Lesław Roj?" I asked to make sure.

"That's right. He's on the veranda at the moment. I believe he's looking through some materials."

I nodded and accepted the key.

I wasn't going to look for him immediately. First, I wanted to see my room, unpack the essentials, and find a place where I could work in peace. I had already had enough experience with people who could spend the first day talking about a shared vision and the second sending comments about every little detail.

My room was upstairs. It was bright, with a large window overlooking the garden and a small desk against the wall. I placed my sketchbook on it, took off my coat, and walked over to the window. In the distance, I could see part of the veranda, where two wooden armchairs stood.

That was where I wanted to work later.

I picked up my sketchbook and went downstairs. I had no desire to spend my first evening shut away in my room. The air after the rain was cool but pleasant. The veranda was half in shadow, and the soft glow of the lamps brought out the warm tones of the wood.

A man was sitting at one of the tables.

An open laptop, several printouts, and a cup of coffee were spread out in front of him. He was wearing a dark sweater, its sleeves casually pushed up. He didn't look like

someone who had come here to relax. More like a man who could work under any circumstances, as long as he had access to coffee and a stable internet connection.

I raised my sketchbook slightly so I wouldn't disturb him and headed toward an empty armchair.

Then a gust of wind caught one of the loose sheets of paper. I must not have secured it properly between the pages. It sailed across the veranda and came to rest beside the man's foot.

He picked it up before I could react.

"I believe this belongs to you."

I approached and held out my hand.

"Thank you."

He didn't give me the sheet immediately. Instead, he studied the drawing: an old tenement building with windows reflecting the light of the setting sun.

"Beautiful," he said.

"I know."

He looked up. For a moment, he seemed surprised, then he smiled.

"At least you don't feel the need to pretend to be modest."

"And you don't need to pretend to be an art critic. It's just a sketch."

"I'm not pretending. I simply like things that don't try to be something they're not."

He handed the sheet back to me.

His voice was calm, slightly deeper than I had expected. He spoke without rushing, as though he had no need to fill

every silence. I also noticed that he wasn't looking at me in the way I had grown accustomed to during certain professional meetings. He wasn't judging my clothes or searching for confirmation of his own importance. He was simply listening.

It was unexpectedly pleasant.

"Have you come here to work?" he asked.

"Definitely. Although I hope the location won't get in the way."

"The Bieszczady rarely get in the way. People do that more often."

"In that case, we seem to have had similar experiences."

This time, his smile was more pronounced.

"Lesław Roj."

His name sounded familiar. For a second, I couldn't connect it with a face, even though I had been exchanging messages with him about the project for weeks. I knew his comments, his suggested revisions, and the way he phrased his feedback. I knew he was a literary editor. I just hadn't known what he looked like.

"Aniela Żur," I replied.

"I know."

"That's a little unsettling."

"I hope not as unsettling as your response to my comments on the latest version of the materials."

I rested my sketchbook against the table.

"If you're referring to those comments, I still think some of them fail to take the nature of the illustrations into account."

"And I still believe readers should be given the opportunity to step inside a book, not just admire it from the outside."

"So we're starting with a disagreement?"

"It seems we didn't even need a formal meeting to get there."

I didn't answer immediately. This was exactly what I had been afraid of. Not the disagreement itself, but the way it could spread through the entire working process. I wasn't going to surrender control over my illustrations simply because someone knew how to speak convincingly about the needs of readers.

"We'll sort everything out tomorrow," I finally said. "Tonight, I'd simply like to enjoy the quiet."

"I understand."

He closed his laptop and moved the printouts aside, making room on the table.

It was a small gesture, but I noticed it. He didn't try to keep me there with more conversation, add another argument, or treat my withdrawal as an invitation to negotiate.

"Then I hope you have a peaceful evening, Aniela."

"You too, Lesław."

I had walked several steps away before remembering my sketchbook. I had left it on the armchair. Noticing this, he picked it up and handed it to me without a word.

Our fingers brushed for a brief moment. Nothing remarkable. An ordinary accident that shouldn't have meant anything.

And yet, when I returned to my room, I found myself unable to concentrate on my drawings for quite some time.

Through the window, I could see the garden growing darker. A lamp was still glowing on the veranda, and Lesław's silhouette moved behind the glass. He had returned to work. I, meanwhile, couldn't shake the thought that the man with whom I was about to spend the next several weeks was far more difficult to put into a neat category than his correspondence had suggested.

I took my calendar out of my bag and opened it to the page where I had written down my schedule for the stay. Mornings for myself. Afternoons for the project. Evenings without obligations. No additional arrangements, no unnecessary compromises.

I ran my finger over the hours I had written down, as though doing so could reassure me that they still belonged to me.

I didn't yet know whether Lesław would be a good editor. I didn't know whether he was capable of respecting someone else's vision or whether our professional differences would prove creatively stimulating or simply exhausting. But I did know that his presence had already changed something in the carefully prepared plan I had made, and it was only the first evening.

For the first time in a long while, I found myself asking a question I had no intention of asking:

If tomorrow revealed that he was something more than just a difficult collaborator, would I know how to let him stay, even just a little longer?

Chapter 1 - The Terms of Collaboration

The following morning, I woke up earlier than I had planned. Mist still hung outside the window, and the wet branches of the trees shifted slightly in the wind. For several minutes, I lay perfectly still, listening to the sounds of the residence. Someone moved a chair in the corridor, a door closed somewhere downstairs, and then came the quiet hum of the coffee machine. An ordinary morning that should have belonged entirely to me.

I reached for my sketchbook. On the last page was a composition I had started working on before arriving. It showed the interior of an empty room, seen through a half-open door. There was no person in it, only light falling across the floor and the shadow of a curtain. I wanted to develop this idea into a series of illustrations for my own portfolio. I already had several concepts in mind, but I still hadn't found the time to give them their final form.

I moved my pencil along the edge of the window. It took only a few minutes to feel as though I was regaining control of my own day.

I had a meeting with Lesław and the project coordinator at nine. Until then, I intended to finish my sketch, have breakfast, and prepare for the discussion. I wasn't expecting any difficulties. After all, we both knew what our responsibilities were. I was in charge of the visual side, while he was responsible for the text and editing. Creating a book together didn't mean we had to make every decision together.

At five past nine, I went downstairs to the library room.

It was located in the residence's side wing. Tall windows overlooked the garden, and a long table with several lamps stood against one of the walls. Printed text excerpts, folders, and paper samples were spread across its surface. Lesław was sitting by the window. He wore a light-colored shirt with the sleeves rolled up and dark trousers. He was reading something on his laptop, with a cup of coffee beside him.

He looked up when I entered.

"Good morning."

"Good morning. I see you've already claimed half the table."

"Only the part that hasn't been occupied by documents."

"Documents don't need that much space."

"That depends on the documents."

I didn't smile, although his reply was rather good. I placed my sketchbook at the free end of the table and took off my coat.

A moment later, Marta joined us. She was the residence coordinator and the person responsible for communicating with the publishing house. She brought three copies of the schedule and a small folder containing materials related to the book. She was around forty, with short hair and a way of speaking that left no doubt she liked everything to be organized.

"Good, you're both here. I'd like us to settle the most important organizational matters today. You don't need to decide on every illustration or every sentence, but we do need to share an understanding of what this book is supposed to be."

I sat opposite Lesław.

Marta opened the folder and took out the first page of the project brief. At the top was the working title: Things That Remain. Below it was a description of the publication, which I already knew from the earlier materials.

The book was meant to tell the stories of places that still carried traces of human presence, even after their original purpose had long ceased to exist. Houses, rooms, workshops, railway stations, and spaces that had changed owners or functions. The texts would combine personal memories, observations, and short literary pieces. The illustrations weren't supposed to document specific buildings, but rather bring out their emotional meaning.

That was precisely the idea that had persuaded me to accept the commission. I didn't want to create another album filled with pretty pictures. I was interested in what remained inside a person after leaving a place. Sometimes it was a memory of someone, sometimes a smell, sometimes an object that nobody had found the courage to throw away.

"I suggest we start with the structure," Lesław said. "If we have thirty texts, we need to decide how they're going to speak to one another."

"I don't think they all need to speak to one another," I replied. "Some of them can stand on their own."

"They can. But readers should feel they're moving through a book, not browsing a random collection of materials."

"Not every story needs to follow the same direction."

"No. But they do need to be arranged deliberately."

He opened one of the printouts. I saw an excerpt about an old house where several generations of the same family had lived over the years. The author described the table where

everyone gathered on Sundays and the room nobody wanted to use after the oldest resident had died.

"This text shouldn't be placed next to the story about the closed railway station," he continued. "Not because one is stronger or weaker than the other. They simply deal with different kinds of loss."

"Or perhaps that's exactly why they should be next to each other?" I asked. "One story is about losing a place, the other about losing everyday life. Readers can find the connection themselves."

Lesław looked at me more attentively.

"That's interesting. But you can't assume every combination will work simply because you have a visual idea for it."

"I'm not assuming anything. That's precisely why I want to see the whole collection before making decisions about the illustrations."

"And I want to see your illustration proposals before I finalize the order of the texts."

For a moment, we looked at each other in silence.

Marta cleared her throat.

"That's exactly why we're meeting together," she said. "You don't have to agree from the very first minute. You need to find a way of working that allows you to make use of each other's expertise."

I rested my hands on the table.

"I have one condition. I don't want the texts to dictate how I draw. If I decide that a particular illustration should be abstract or contain no recognizable object, I don't want to

receive comments saying it should depict exactly what the text describes."

Lesław moved the printout aside.

"I'm not planning to commission an illustration for every paragraph. But if an image changes the meaning of a passage, we need to discuss it."

"We can discuss it."

"That's not the same as approving it after the fact."

I noticed that he wasn't raising his voice. Nor was he trying to use Marta's presence to force his position through. He spoke calmly, but he wasn't backing down. There was something irritating about that, and at the same time, something difficult to dismiss.

"You want to have a say in the illustrations?"

"I want to have a say in the book I'm editorially responsible for. You have a say in the images. I don't see why we should pretend those two things will never intersect."

"And I don't see why every difference should be treated as a mistake that needs correcting."

Marta slid the schedule toward us.

"Perhaps we should establish a procedure. First, you'll prepare independent proposals. Lesław will work on the order of the texts, and Aniela will present her visual concept. Then you'll hold a joint consultation and decide which elements need adjustments. We won't approve anything without both of you being involved."

"That sounds reasonable," I said.

"Provided the consultation doesn't consist of sending comments back and forth after the work has already been completed," Lesław added.

I looked at him.

"You have an exceptional talent for complicating simple arrangements."

"Professional deformation."

"Then I hope it's not incurable."

This time Marta laughed. Lesław did too, although his smile was considerably more restrained.

We returned to the schedule. We agreed on deadlines for the initial proposals, the number of meetings, and the method of sharing materials. My mornings were to remain free of mandatory consultations, except in situations where we both agreed in advance to a change. We reserved the afternoons for work on the joint publication.

That particular provision mattered more to me than I wanted to admit. I hadn't come to the Bieszczady to once again subordinate my own projects to someone else's calendar.

"I also don't want us making changes to each other's materials without discussing them first," I said as Marta wrote down the final arrangements.

Lesław put down his pen.

"I agree, provided we don't treat every suggestion as an intrusion into the other person's area of expertise."

"I can promise to listen to the arguments."

"That's something."

"Don't get used to quick victories."

For a brief moment, his gaze lingered on my face. There was no triumph in it. Rather, the amusement of someone who had just discovered that the conversation would be more difficult, but probably more interesting, than he had expected.

After the meeting, Marta left to take a phone call. I stayed with Lesław at the table, sorting through the printouts. I picked up several pages lying beside his laptop.

"Are these all the texts?" I asked.

"Most of them. A few still need the authors' permission for the cuts."

"And do you already know which ones are the most important?"

"No. I know which ones make the strongest first impression. That's not always the same thing."

That interested me more than it probably should have.

"Why?"

"Because a text that makes the biggest impression on the first reading isn't necessarily the one that stays with you the longest. Sometimes the most important sentence is somewhere in the middle, almost unnoticed."

I looked through the pages. One contained a description of a small room where a tailor's shop had operated for several decades. The owner didn't want to move out, even though the building had been scheduled for renovation. The author described her habit of always putting her scissors back in exactly the same place.

"This is good," I said.

"I think so too."

"But I'm not sure I should illustrate it literally."

"You shouldn't."

I looked up.

"Really?"

"Really. If I wanted to see a pair of scissors on a table, I'd buy a catalogue of workshop equipment."

I laughed before I could stop myself.

"That's the first sensible argument I've heard today."

"Please make a note of it. It might come in handy."

For a while, we sorted the documents without speaking. I noticed that Lesław didn't arrange them according to their numbers, but according to small sticky notes bearing his own comments. Each was a different color, and some had just a single word written on them: "return," "absence," "everyday life," "witness."

"Do you really label everything like that?" I asked.

"Only the things I don't want to lose."

"And what happens if you lose a note?"

"Then I have to read the text again."

"So the system relies on memory."

"And on not throwing papers away in a hurry."

I glanced at the stack of sheets. There was something surprisingly personal about his organized chaos. He didn't seem like someone who worked mechanically. He noticed details, but didn't feel the need to draw attention to them.

"Do you draw everything, too?" he asked.

"Not everything."

"That's a shame."

"Why?"

"Because I'd like to see what an illustration of your note-taking system would look like."

"By all means. I'd probably draw a man trying to organize a mess instead of simply throwing half the papers away."

"That would be a rather merciless portrait."

"I never promised it would be flattering."

He smiled, and for the first time I thought that perhaps talking to him would be easier than I had anticipated. That didn't mean we'd know how to work together. A good conversation didn't solve professional problems, and mutual sympathy wasn't an argument about the composition of a book.

I picked up my sketchbook and headed for the exit.

"Aniela?"

I turned around.

"Yes?"

"I know we agreed on independent proposals. But I'd like us to talk about one text tomorrow. The one about the tailor's shop. I have a feeling we could build something more important around it than a single chapter."

"Send me the materials."

"I can. But I'd rather hear what you see in it first."

I considered that for a moment.

"Tomorrow afternoon. Provided you don't try to decide what I should draw."

"And if I have a good suggestion?"

"Then you'll be allowed to present it."

"Fair arrangement."

"For now."

I left the library feeling that the meeting hadn't ended quite as I had planned. But I hadn't lost any of the things that mattered to me. My hours had been protected, our roles defined, and the scope of our responsibilities put in writing.

Still, as I walked back to my room, I wasn't thinking about the schedule. I was thinking about one sentence Lesław had said. He wanted to hear what I saw first.

I couldn't remember any of my recent clients asking me a similar question.

It wasn't enough to trust someone. But it was enough to make me less eager to end the conversation the following day.

Chapter 2 - Boundaries and a Shared Language

The following day, I devoted the morning to my own illustrations. I closed my room door, silenced my phone, and spread several sheets of paper across the desk. I wanted to prepare a series of sketches before I started thinking about the book Lesław and I were working on. Not because the project had stopped interesting me. I simply needed a reminder that my professional life didn't begin and end with a single commission.

Around noon, Marta called. She told me that a package containing paper samples was waiting for me in the dining room and that we could use a small studio on the ground floor after lunch. A space was being prepared there for our joint consultations.

I went downstairs carrying my folder of sketches. Lesław was already sitting at a table in the dining room. An open notebook lay in front of him, and beside it was a plate with a sandwich he apparently hadn't had time to finish.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning. How was your morning?"

"Mine."

He looked at me with mild amusement.

"I see. I won't ask for details."

"That's sensible."

He gestured toward the chair opposite him.

"I brought the text about the tailor's shop. I thought we could start with that."

I sat down and took out my notes.

"I read it last night. I'm not convinced by the proposed ending."

"Neither am I."

"That's good. At least we won't have to argue about everything."

"I wouldn't get too attached to that hope."

He handed me the printout. I read the highlighted passage. The story was about a woman who had run a small tailoring shop for more than thirty years. After closing the premises, she moved some of the equipment into her apartment, but never returned to work. The text mentioned a sewing machine standing by the window and the marks left by chairs on the wooden floor.

"The author ends with a sentence about the empty room," Lesław said. "I think it brings the story to a conclusion too easily."

"Because the reader is given a ready-made interpretation?"

"Exactly. Everything is explained before the reader has a chance to ask a question."

I ran my finger along the printout.

"I see it differently. I wouldn't want to draw the shop itself. I'm more interested in the moment when someone is no longer needed by a place where they've spent half their life."

"That's powerful."

"But I don't want to turn that woman into a symbol. She was a real person. She had her habits, her customers, and probably days when she didn't feel like talking to anyone."

"So the illustration should show everyday life rather than loss?"

"Perhaps its traces. A worktop with tiny cuts left in the surface. Or the light falling on a wall where a mirror once hung. I don't want to draw emptiness as some enormous, dramatic event."

Lesław was silent for a moment. Then he picked up his pen and wrote something in the margin.

"And the text?" he asked.

"It should end earlier. With the sentence about the woman still putting her scissors in the same place, even though she no longer had a table where she could use them."

He raised his head.

"That sentence isn't in the current ending."

"It's in the middle. We could move it to the end."

"And remove the final paragraph?"

"Yes."

He didn't answer immediately. He read the passage again, then put down his pen.

"I agree."

I was surprised by how easily he said it. I had already prepared arguments in my head in case he started defending the original ending.

"No reservations at all?"

"I have one. We need to ask the author whether they're willing to agree to changing the order of the paragraphs."

"Of course."

"I don't want us altering someone else's story simply because we've found a better composition for it."

I looked at him more carefully.

"That's fair."

"I'm trying."

There was no false modesty in his voice. He was simply stating a fact. I thought that this was precisely the kind of attitude that had been missing from several of my previous collaborations. I didn't need someone who would agree with everything I said. I needed someone who could distinguish between personal ambition and responsibility for another person's work.

After lunch, we moved to the studio.

The room was small but well lit. Shelves filled with paper stood against one wall, and a wide table had been placed beneath the window. In the center was enough space for us to spread out larger sheets. The air carried a faint scent of wood and printing ink.

I laid out my sketches. Lesław brought the text printouts, along with several suggestions for the chapter layout. We didn't start discussing every piece of material. Instead, we decided to choose three stories that could establish the tone of the entire publication.

The first was about the tailoring shop. The second concerned a small railway station where passenger trains had not stopped for years. The third told the story of an apartment that had stood empty for several months after its owners moved abroad.

"I don't want to start with the strongest story," Lesław said, looking through the texts. "If the opening pages are too heavy, readers might not find room for their own memories."

"And if we start with something too neutral, they'll have no reason to stay."

"Which means we need something that opens a door without immediately telling people what's inside."

"That sounds like a job for the illustrator."

"I'm not taking your work away from you."

"Yet."

He smiled.

We began spreading the pages across the table. I moved them around, changed their order, and compared fragments of text with my sketches. Lesław read certain sentences aloud, sometimes pausing over a single word. He didn't do it theatrically. He read as though he were checking whether the rhythm of the text matched the image slowly taking shape in our conversation.

At one point, I noticed that he had stopped for longer than usual at one of my sketches. It showed an empty corridor with an open door. A rectangle of light lay across the floor, and the wall bore the shadow left by a picture that had been taken down.

"This isn't an illustration for the tailor's shop," he said.

"No."

"Which text have you assigned it to?"

"None yet."

He studied the drawing.