# Your Voice in My Kitchen

*Not Every Story Belongs on Air*



Laura Bellini

# Your Voice in My Kitchen

## Not Every Story Belongs on Air

Laura Bellini

ROMANS

ISBN: 9788384904572

ALL-IN Rafał Płonkowski

# CONTENTS

INTRO ..... 4
Chapter 1 - The Voice That Didn't Know Silence..... 11
Chapter 2 - Rules at One Table ..... 23
Chapter 3 - When the Microphones Fall Silent..... 36
Chapter 4 - After Hours..... 47
Chapter 5 - The Right to Say No..... 58
Chapter 6 - The Taste of a First Kiss..... 69
Chapter 7 - What Remains Between the Words ..... 80
Chapter 8 - A Place Where You Don't Have to Pretend .....91
Chapter 9 - Voices Worth Preserving.....100
Chapter 10 - Stay Until Morning ..... 111
Chapter 11 - Room for Two .....123
Chapter 12 - The Story I Refused to Give Away .....134
Chapter 13 - The Price of a Good Idea ..... 144
Chapter 14 - Everything We Didn't Say .....154
Chapter 15 - The Story He Had No Right to Tell .....165
Chapter 16 - Silence Between the Windows .....176
Chapter 17 - In My Own Words.....184
Chapter 18 - What He Kept Off the Air .....193
Chapter 19 - My Story, My Terms ..... 203
Chapter 20 - At Our Table .....213

# INTRO

At eleven forty-seven at night, a stranger's voice announced through the wall that the most important conversations in life took place at the kitchen table.

I was standing barefoot on cold tiles, with a knife in one hand and half a lemon in the other. Seven pages covered in corrections lay on the counter, and a cake I had no intention of serving to anyone was finishing in the oven. Baking at that hour was my way of coping with deadlines. Instead of imagining a professional disaster, I measured flour. Instead of checking my email for the twentieth time, I whisked eggs.

That evening, I had more reasons than usual to bake.

In three days, I had to present the final concept for my own book on home cooking to a publishing house. After fifteen years of correcting other people's recipes, rescuing disastrous photo shoots, and convincing authors that a cup of flour was not a universal unit of measurement, I had finally been given the chance to put my own name on a book.

Berenika Żak. Thirty-seven years old. A recipe editor who could detect incorrectly stated proportions from the smell of a cake alone, but couldn't tell her mother why she hadn't come to Sunday dinner in two years.

Fortunately, the second part wasn't going to appear in my book proposal.

"The family table isn't a piece of furniture," the man beyond the wall said. "It's the place where people stop pretending they have everything under control."

I put down the knife.

"Not everyone," I muttered.

My table was precisely where I tried to regain control over everything.

I lived on the second floor of an old tenement building in Nadodrze, Wrocław. My kitchen overlooked a narrow courtyard separating our building from the one opposite. The distance between the windows was so small that over the years I'd learned to recognize the habits of the neighbors across the way. The elderly woman on the ground floor watered her flowers at six every morning. The student on the third floor played his guitar only when he had visitors. And for the past week, someone in the apartment directly opposite mine, at exactly the same height as my window, had been running a recording studio at night.

At first, it hadn't bothered me particularly. A quiet voice, a musical jingle, an occasional laugh. It was better than the previous tenant, who had watched football matches every evening with the intensity of someone personally responsible for the result.

But tonight, the voice was talking about kitchens.

About my kitchens.

And, worst of all, he spoke beautifully.

It was an irritating discovery.

His voice was low and calm, with a particular way of pausing. He never hurried into the next sentence, as though he knew someone on the other end would be waiting for it. He didn't try to sound clever. He sounded as if he were telling a story to one person sitting very close to him.

I pulled the window almost shut.

The voice faded.

For two minutes, I worked in the silence I'd been longing for, correcting a sentence about family recipes. Then I realized I couldn't remember a single thing I'd read.

I opened the window again.

"...because sometimes the most important ingredient is the one nobody writes down in the recipe."

I rolled my eyes.

"Like the right amount of butter," I said, a little too loudly.

Silence fell on the other side of the courtyard.

I froze, still holding the lemon.

"Butter?" the man said.

I looked toward the neighboring window. A small lamp was glowing behind the glass. I could see part of a bookshelf, a microphone on a boom arm, and the silhouette of a man leaning over a desk.

"Definitely butter," I replied, because now that I'd spoken, retreating would have been even more embarrassing.

The figure raised his head.

"That's an interesting interpretation of human intimacy."

"One that's been tested in practice."

I heard him laugh. A brief, surprised laugh, entirely lacking in radio polish.

"I'm recording," he warned me.

"And I'm trying to work."

"So we're both interfering with each other's professional lives."

"The difference is that I'm doing it in my own kitchen."

"So am I."

Only then did I notice the tiles behind him and the pots hanging above the counter. His microphone stood on the kitchen table beside a mug and an open notebook.

I hadn't expected that. I'd imagined a professional studio, expensive equipment, and a man discussing authenticity from a room lined with acoustic panels.

Instead, I saw someone recording in a kitchen just as small as mine.

"May I ask what you're making?" he said.

"No."

"I understand. A professional secret."

"Lemon cake."

"And yet you told me."

"To end the conversation."

He laughed again.

I should have closed the window. Turned around, taken the cake out of the oven, and gone back to my manuscript. Instead, I rested my hands on the windowsill.

The man rose from the table and came closer. He was wearing a dark shirt with the sleeves rolled up. In the warm lamplight, I noticed gray at his temples and a face that was more interesting than conventionally handsome. He looked straight at me, without embarrassment but also without the pushy self-assurance some men mistook for charm.

"Ariel," he introduced himself. "Ariel Róg."

The surname sounded familiar.

"Berenika Żak."

"Good evening, Ms. Żak."

"It's almost midnight."

"Then a good beginning to tomorrow."

I smiled before I had time to decide whether I wanted to.

The oven timer sounded from inside my apartment. I turned my head, and when I looked through the window again, Ariel was still standing there.

"Your cake," he reminded me.

"I know."

"Don't blame me if it burns."

"I haven't decided yet."

I took the tin out of the oven, placed it on a cooling rack, and studied its smooth, golden surface for a moment. Success. At least one thing that evening had turned out exactly as I'd planned.

When I returned to the window, my neighbor was already sitting at his microphone.

"Can I ask one last question?" he called.

"That depends on the question."

"Who did you bake the cake for?"

I looked at the empty table. At the second cup I'd kept in the cupboard for months. At the phone lying facedown so I wouldn't have to see another message from my mother.

"For myself," I answered.

It didn't sound as convincing as I'd intended.

Ariel didn't comment. He simply nodded.

"That's a good reason."

What surprised me was that he didn't ask why I was alone. He didn't make a joke about late-night snacking or

ask for a slice. He accepted my answer as though it required no justification.

I turned away from the window and sat down at the table.

The first page of my proposal bore the working title Recipes That Stay. Beneath it, I'd written down ideas for chapters devoted to dishes passed down from generation to generation. Every recipe was supposed to have a short story attached, but not one of those stories would come from my own life.

I knew perfectly well why I'd chosen that arrangement.

Two years earlier, I'd agreed to tell someone about a family dinner that had changed everything. My words had traveled further than they should have. Since then, I'd been careful not only about whom I spoke to, but also about which memories I allowed to find a voice.

Now I wanted to create something of my own. A book in which I would decide what belonged between the covers.

My phone lit up with a message from my friend Marta.

Remember, the publisher is calling tomorrow at nine. And Berenika? This time, don't give someone else your story.

I read the message twice.

Outside the window, Ariel began another recording. This time his voice was quieter, almost intimate.

"Not everything that happens around a table needs to be told. Sometimes it's enough for someone to sit down at that table and truly listen."

I went to the window once more.

Ariel noticed me, took off his headphones, and switched off the microphone.

"Am I disturbing you?" he asked.

I had a sensible answer ready. I could have asked him to finish earlier. I could have closed the window, returned to my proposal, and forgotten about the man in the neighboring building.

Instead, I pointed at the microphone.

"Do you really believe what you just said?"

"Every word."

"Even if the story belongs to someone who doesn't want to tell it at all?"

His expression grew serious. For a moment, the only sound between our windows was a tram passing along a distant street.

"Then you need to know when to stop asking questions," he replied.

I looked at him for longer than was appropriate to look at a stranger.

I wanted to believe him. And what unsettled me even more was that I wanted to hear his voice again.

"And do you know how to stop?" I asked.

# Chapter 1 - The Voice That Didn't Know Silence

The following morning, I discovered that the man from the neighboring building possessed not only an exceptionally pleasant voice but also the dreadful habit of occupying other people's thoughts.

It was eight seventeen. I was sitting in front of my laptop with a cup of cold coffee, reviewing my presentation for the publishing house one last time. On the screen were photographs of family tables, handwritten recipes, and dishes meant to look as though someone had actually prepared them, rather than a food stylist armed with tweezers. Everything had been carefully refined. I'd even chosen the colors of the slides to evoke the warmth of a home kitchen.

And yet, for the past five minutes, I'd been wondering whether Ariel Róg really knew how to stop asking questions.

The previous evening, he hadn't answered me immediately. He'd studied my window for a moment before saying:

"I'm learning."

Then he'd wished me a peaceful night and closed his window.

I should have considered the conversation finished. Instead, I'd searched for his name.

Forty-two years old. Podcast host and audio documentary journalist. He presented a popular program called Between the Words, in which he talked to people about seemingly

ordinary events. He had a reputation for drawing extraordinary stories out of the most unassuming guests.

I'd also found a short recording of an interview he'd given a year earlier.

"The most interesting things are the ones people don't want to say at first."

I'd stopped the video halfway through.

Now, sitting at my own table, I was trying to convince myself that none of it mattered. The man lived across the courtyard. I was preparing a book. There was no reason for our lives to intersect.

At nine o'clock, my publisher called.

"Berenika, I have good news and slightly complicated news," Joanna Mirecka announced before I could even say hello.

Joanna always spoke like that when she wanted to conceal bad news beneath a layer of enthusiasm.

"Start with the good news."

"The management board has approved the direction of your book."

For a second, I sat perfectly still.

"Really?"

"Really. They like the idea of family recipes and the stories connected with food. But they want a stronger promotional launch. Something that will let people get to know you before the book comes out."

"I could prepare a series of articles."

"We were thinking about audio."

I glanced at the window.

"Audio?"

"A short program. A few episodes about family tables. Conversations, memories, cooking. We're in contact with a producer who's looking for exactly this kind of project."

A new message appeared on my computer screen. Joanna had sent me a document entitled The Tables We Stay At — Pilot Proposal.

Beneath the program's title was the presenter's name.

Ariel Róg.

I closed my eyes.

"You have to be joking."

"What?"

"Nothing. I just know that name."

"All the better. Ariel gets excellent results. His producer needs someone who can ensure the culinary credibility of the project, and we need publicity for your book. It's a natural fit."

"I won't agree to talk about my personal life."

Joanna sighed.

"Nobody's saying you have to."

"Then I want that in writing."

"Berenika, I understand your caution. But before you reject anything, meet with them. This could be a genuinely good opportunity."

After the call, I stared at the document for a long time. The deadline for presenting my book remained unchanged. So did the decision to publish it. The audio program was supposed to be an additional undertaking, but its success

could determine how much attention the publishing house devoted to my debut.

I disliked arrangements like that. Especially when someone presented them as an obvious opportunity.

At ten twenty, I received a message from an unknown number.

Good morning, Ms. Żak. Joanna Mirecka gave me your contact details. Could we talk about the project? Ariel Róg.

I replied immediately.

We can. Provided you won't be recording this time.

His answer arrived within seconds.

I promise. Unless you demand evidence.

I didn't want to smile.

I smiled.

We met that same day at four in the afternoon in a small café on Łokietka Street. I'd chosen somewhere neutral, with large windows and tables positioned far enough apart to allow a conversation without an audience.

I arrived ten minutes early. I placed my notebook, phone, and a printed copy of the proposal on the table. I'd prepared questions about the format, schedule, recording rights, and the process for approving material.

What I hadn't prepared for was seeing Ariel in daylight.

He arrived on time, wearing dark trousers and a light sweater beneath an open coat. He was taller than he'd seemed through the window. He had broad shoulders, slightly tired eyes, and hair that he apparently styled with his fingers rather than a comb.

He stopped beside my table.

"Ms. Żak?"

"Mr. Róg."

"After our conversation across the courtyard yesterday, I feel as though we could dispense with the formalities."

"After our conversation yesterday, I feel we should observe them particularly carefully."

He smiled and took off his coat.

"A sensible observation."

He sat opposite me, and I noticed that he didn't put his phone on the table. He slipped it into his pocket before ordering coffee.

I don't know why I noticed. Perhaps because, since the previous evening, I'd begun thinking of microphones as objects capable of taking more from a person than they intended to give.

"Let's start with the most important thing," I said. "I don't want to be the subject of the program."

Ariel leaned back slightly.

"And what role would you like to have?"

"Editorial consultant. I can develop the recipes, speak with participants before recordings, and check the facts. I can even suggest topics. But I don't want my life to become the content of the program."

"I understand."

"Good."

"I haven't said I agree yet."

I raised my eyebrows.

"Excuse me?"

"I want to create a program that feels alive. Not a collection of statements scrubbed clean of emotion. If we invite people to talk about food, we have to allow for the possibility that they'll also talk about love, loss, shame, and things that can't be organized into a recipe."

"That doesn't mean we have the right to use everything they say."

"Of course not."

"And yet you sound as though it's precisely the private things that interest you most."

He leaned forward, resting his forearms on the table.

"I'm interested in what's real."

"Privacy is real too."

For a moment, we looked at each other without speaking. He didn't look away or try to defuse my objection with a joke.

"You're right," he said at last. "But for me, a good program can't simply be an advertisement for a book. It has to have a purpose of its own. If we're going to work together, I can't promise that every uncomfortable question will be removed."

"And I can't promise I'll answer."

"That's not something I expect."

The waitress brought our coffee. Ariel moved his cup aside to make room for my printout, which occupied almost half the table.

"Will you show me your concept?"

For the next several minutes, I talked him through the project, trying not to notice how attentively he listened. He

didn't interrupt. He didn't glance at his watch. When I showed him the photographs, he leaned over them with an interest I couldn't dismiss as professional courtesy.

His finger stopped above a photograph of an old wooden table.

"Why this one?"

"Because it's imperfect. You can see marks from hot dishes, scratches, a wine stain. Someone actually lived at this table."

"Rather than just posing beside it for a photograph."

"Exactly."

"Then perhaps we're trying to do the same thing."

I looked at him cautiously.

"I'm not sure."

"You want to show real kitchens. I want to hear real conversations. Those things don't have to be contradictory."

"As long as we remember who those conversations belong to."

He nodded.

"All right. Let's establish some rules."

He took out his notebook. On the first page were several sentences written in small handwriting. I caught only a fragment: The table as a place of memory. Not nostalgia, but a choice about what remains.

Further down was the word silence, underlined twice.

"We'll start with three trial interviews," he suggested. "Nothing gets published. We'll see whether the format works."

"And whether anyone can keep a secret around you."

He laughed softly.

"Do you really consider me a threat?"

"I consider you a man who earns his living from other people's stories."

"That's a rather harsh definition."

"But not entirely inaccurate."

He studied me for a moment, then closed his notebook.

"And you earn your living correcting other people's recipes. Are authors always delighted when you tell them they've done something wrong?"

"Usually not."

"But you do it anyway."

"Because otherwise the reader's cake won't turn out properly."

"In that case, we both believe that sometimes you have to tell someone something uncomfortable."

I didn't like the fact that his argument made sense.

I liked it even less that he delivered it with a smile containing not the slightest trace of triumph.

At five thirty, we left the café. Clouds were gathering over Wrocław, and the air smelled of wet paving stones. We walked in the same direction because only a small courtyard separated our buildings.

"May I ask why you decided to write your own book only now?" Ariel said.

"Because until now, I've been busy making books for other people."

"That's the professional answer."

"Were you expecting a personal one?"

"I was curious."

"Curiosity isn't always a sufficient reason to ask."

He accepted the remark without protest.

We passed a small bakery, the scent of fresh bread drifting out onto the pavement. He stopped beside the window but didn't go inside.

"Do you know what interested me about your idea?" he asked.

"I hope it was the quality of the recipes."

"That too. But mainly the fact that you're not trying to convince anyone what an ideal home should look like."

I looked at him.

"I don't believe in ideal homes."

"Neither do I."

He said it calmly, but something in his voice stopped me from asking why.

We paused beside the entrance to my building. Ariel gestured toward the neighboring tenement.

"If I'd known you lived so close, I'd have suggested meeting at the kitchen table."

"That would have been a little too literal."

"But more economical."

"And less neutral."

"Is neutrality very important to you?"

I considered the question for a moment.

"What's important is being able to decide for myself when I no longer need it."

Ariel grew serious.

"That's a fair condition."

I wasn't sure whether he was still talking about work.

Before I could answer, his phone rang inside his coat pocket. He glanced at the screen and briefly pressed his lips together.

"I need to take this. My producer."

He moved a few steps away. I didn't eavesdrop, but I saw his relaxed posture become noticeably more tense. The conversation was brief. When he returned, his face had settled into a polite, professional expression.

"We've been given a date to present the pilot concept," he said. "Two weeks from now."

"So soon?"

"Sooner than I planned."

"And if I refuse to participate?"

"I'll have to find another solution."

He said it without any attempt at emotional blackmail. Even so, I suddenly felt the weight of a decision I hadn't yet made.

"I'll send you my proposed rules tomorrow," I announced.

"Good."

"And I don't want any more late-night recordings that I can hear from my apartment."

He smiled.

"That, at least, I can promise immediately."

For a moment, we stood facing one another in the chilly afternoon air. Up close, I could see fine lines around his eyes and a small scar on his chin. He didn't have the face of a man who always knew what to say. Rather, he looked like someone who had learned to search patiently for the right words.

"Berenika," he said more quietly.

It was the first time he'd used my first name without any formal addition.

"Yes?"

"I wouldn't want our working relationship to begin with you believing that I intend to take something away from you."

It took me a moment to answer.

"Then please don't take anything away from me."

He nodded.

We went our separate ways, each through our own entrance.

That evening, I received a message from him.

I'm sending you a draft description of the program. And one question unrelated to work: did the lemon cake turn out well?

I opened the attachment. The title on the first page was At One Table.

Beneath it were the words: Conversations about what people keep to themselves and what they choose to tell.

I read the sentence several times.

Then I replied:

The cake turned out perfectly. As for the program, we still have quite a lot to discuss.

His response appeared almost immediately.

The best things take time.

I looked around my empty kitchen. At the second mug that had been standing on the drying rack since morning. At the window beyond which no light had appeared yet.

For the first time in a long while, silence no longer seemed like something I simply needed.

I wondered whether I'd also begun waiting for someone to interrupt it.

# Chapter 2 - Rules at One Table

On Friday morning, I sent Ariel a document entitled Terms of Cooperation.

It was four pages long.

Marta, whom I'd shown it to earlier, read the entire thing during our weekly breakfast at a small café near Bema Square. When she'd finished, she put down her phone and looked at me with a mixture of admiration and amusement.

"Berenika, you haven't prepared a set of rules. You've written a constitution."

"I wanted to avoid misunderstandings."

"In section six, subsection three, you prohibit the use of statements overheard by accident."

"Quite right."

"In section eight, you specify the procedure for deleting recordings."

"Also quite right."

"And in section ten, you state that neither party may interpret silence as consent."

"Is there something funny about that?"

Marta put down her phone.

"No. What's funny is that you've spent the last ten minutes telling me about his voice, his eyes, and the way he listens, and then you show me a document designed to protect you from falling in love."

I nearly choked on my coffee.

"I'm not trying to protect myself from falling in love."