

KILL ME IF YOU CAN



kata mlek

## Kill Me If You Can

I.

Agnieszka is standing on a cliff. It looks like one of the ones on the Baltic sea, in Jastrzębia Góra for example. She feels like she's level with the sky, which is great. Plus there are fighter planes flying along the line of the horizon—the pilots at one of the naval bases must be practicing. They zip along the shore and a single loud thud means a plane has crossed the sound barrier. Then the fighters disappear beyond the horizon. Agnieszka laughs. She feels good. It's neither hot, nor cold—neither too early, nor too late. Just perfect.

And it's when things are perfect like this that the anxiety comes. Everyone who grew up around here knows the rules. You don't praise a bridge until you're across. All good things must come to an end. It never rains, but it pours. Doom loves to stomp on delicate human life, and does it without hesitation, ruining everything, demolishing everything.

Her anxiousness grows. She was taught to feel this way when she was still a child. Peace and quiet means a storm is on its way. It's always been this way and it always will be.

Suddenly the world goes dark, as if someone has drawn a curtain over the landscape, a curtain so thick that the sun can't get through. The forest that covers the cliff goes black, and in the darkness the trees suddenly seem to reach high, so high—all the way to the sky. They reach with tense branches like fingers—the fleshless fingers of skeletal hands.

“Help me!” Agnieszka hears, a voice coming from a distance. Someone’s there, farther along, at the edge of the cliff.

She runs over because she knows that voice. She runs because she can hear the urgency in the words. She fights her way through the brush, stumbles over the heather, falls. It feels as if, instead of moving forward quickly, she’s just floundering. Something doesn’t want to let her through.

“Help me!”

But at the same time, this something wants Agnieszka to see, so eventually it lets her push her way through the thick grass, the leaves so sharp that they cut the skin on her calves. She runs, ignoring the pain. And she finally arrives at her destination, at the thing she’s supposed to see.

She’s in an open space. She could swear that it wasn’t here before, that it’s just opened now. It’s just been created or come into being somehow.

“Well, it’s a dream,” says a raven, who appears as suddenly as the clearing did. He sits on a tree that’s fallen over, walking a few steps to the left, then a few to the right.

“Help me, help!” says the familiar voice. Agnieszka looks, knowing exactly who she’ll see.

Her mother stands at the edge of the cliff. She wears a peony print dress, white with red flowers. And red bloodstains, blood blossoms amongst the peonies, weeping from her mother’s body. The blood runs down her naked arms, drips onto the ground.

“Help me, help!”

“Mom, what happened?” Agnieszka cries, running toward her mother. She has no idea what she should do. She wants to touch her, but feels repulsed.

“Help me, quick!”

“Mom!”

“Agnieszka, help me, or I’ll have to do it!”

“Mom! What should I do?”

Agnieszka hears a snapping sound and suddenly the world stops, she stops, her mother stops. The raven is still moving, though, despite the fact that he’s the one who paralyzed everything else. He walks along the tree and recites a rhyme.

#

*For the rescue, not much time*

*Let me give you some advice*

*You can’t stay with him any more*

*That he owes you, he does know*

*Walk away, so far, so far*

*To escape the pain and hurt*

*Run before it is too late*

*Before you cannot change your fate*

#

“But who? What are you talking about?” Agnieszka asks.

“About him, I am talking about him!” the raven says. “Hurry!” She hears another snap and the world lurches into motion again. Her mother is bleeding and crying again.

“Help me!” she reaches for Agnieszka with those bloody arms. There is blood under her nails.

“Mom! I don’t know how!” She turns to the raven. “How am I supposed to help her?” But the raven shakes his head.

“If you don’t know,” her mother says, “then I have to do it.” And with that she jumps, falling from the cliff and hitting the rocky ground below. Although Agnieszka doesn’t actually hear the sound her mother’s body makes when it hits the beach, she knows exactly what the sound must be like.

She wakes up screaming—but not for long. Her own hand quickly covers her mouth. She listens to see if he’s awake. No. Silence.

“What happened?” whispers Agnieszka’s grandmother, who’s sleeping with her in her room. She’s come for a brief visit, to bring some sausages and eggs. She’ll leave tomorrow and she’ll be glad to go. She knows what kind of a man he is.

“The raven,” answers Agnieszka. “It was here.”

II.

“Don’t cry!” her grandmother says.

“I can’t help it!” Agnieszka says the words through the hand that covers her mouth.

Her grandmother pushes the duvet aside. She gets up with an effort—her left foot is stiff after an accident she had at the farm. She gets up and sits on Agnieszka’s bed, puts one hand on her forehead and the other on her heart.

“Be gone!” she says in a hushed tone, then repeats it again and again, until at the end her voice drifts away, the same way it does when she says her beads. She makes the sign of the cross on Agnieszka’s body and puts her hands on her again.

Agnieszka sighs. Very deeply, very powerfully, and in that moment the wind pulls at the branches of the rowan tree that grows outside the window. Agnieszka’s grandmother believes that her breathe moved them. A breath so full of sorrow that in can rustle the leaves.

“Don’t talk to him!” says the grandmother. “Don’t you ever talk to the raven again! Haven’t I told you?”

“Yes, grandma”

“I’ve told you not to talk to him!”

Her grandmother starts to whisper again. She looks out of the window once more. She sighs.

Agnieszka has been dreaming of the raven since she was three. At the beginning he didn’t come very often, and it seemed like just a recurring nightmare. One, and then another. Nothing

special, the grandmother had hoped, clinging to the illusion. But the older Agnieszka got, the more often she dreamed the dream. Unfortunately.

The grandmother sighs. At her place in the countryside she's met people like Agnieszka. People who walk in their sleep, talk in their sleep, have visions. The grandmother sighs again. Nothing good has ever come of it. It's better to chase the evil away. And he *is* evil, this raven—Agnieszka's grandmother can sense that very clearly. He is malicious. He isn't beyond morality, he isn't an indifferent prophet. He's a devil. "Cursed are those who listen to him and cursed is the raven himself." This is what the priest had said, that it's a devil who visits people in their sleep.

She makes the sign of the cross again and begins to calm down. The power of the cross reassures her.

"The bird talked about him," Agnieszka says.

"About whom?"

"About dad."

"Nonsense!" says her grandmother.

Not only does Agnieszka talk about the raven, but also about her father. She says the same things that Ewa says. That she's having problems with him. That he likes to drink, to batter. That things are not the way they were supposed to be. Ewa feels cheated and she's bitter.

"Come on," Agnieszka's grandmother says to her daughter. "There are hard times in every marriage. You have to get through it!" She sighs. She knows it's hard sometimes. She used

to feel the same—it's a woman's fate. And to her granddaughter she says the same thing—"Come on, Agnieszka," like an echo—when the granddaughter complained that her father was abusive, that he drank too much. That no one came to help Agnieszka, even when her mother sometimes cried out loud for help, and Agnieszka cries, too. That the teachers at school pretend they don't see the bruises. That the school psychologist doesn't help her, pretends he doesn't hear what she says. "You know who your father is," her grandmother explains. "You have to hold on. After a storm comes the calm. And you should forget about the raven. Look at the sun in the morning."



III.

Ewa's husband is a very important person in the city, and even more important within *Tysiąclecie*, a new housing complex that was recently built to celebrate the millennium of Poland. There was a meadow here before. Now there are blocks of flats of several different heights, like uneven teeth. They divide the space, get in the way of the wind—no wonder it's even windier here now. The air is squeezed between the buildings, speeds up, and then rushes quickly down the length of the complex. It overturns trash containers and tears leaves off the few, small trees. The complex is new and the trees are too—they're still weak and they can't withstand the force of it. The lawns are bald and the whole complex smells of cement and sand. The wind throws the sand up into peoples' eyes. It smells of heat and desert, although Ewa doesn't know that—she was born in the countryside and she's never been to a desert. For that matter, nobody can leave communist Poland to visit the desert even if they want to—not even her husband, an important officer, who has even more important friends.

He drinks to make those friendships even closer. It was the friendships that attracted Ewa in the first place. They deceived her, like a devil, and she married him and moved to the city. Everyone was jealous of her luck. "They wouldn't be jealous now," she thinks.

She can always tell exactly what his mood will be. She looks out of the window and watches him parking his Trabant. Red. She watches if he immediately gets out or if he drinks something. If he gets out right away, it means he'll be mad, and before he gets completely drunk there'll be a row. If he stays in the car then he'll come upstairs drunk, which is good.

Ewa's husband doesn't care that the neighbors are watching as he walks, reeling from side to side, as he tries to find the door handle, as he falls in the sand that's everywhere in the complex. He rolls, trying to separate up from down, picks up the papers that fell out of his wallet, crawls. He doesn't care that the people are exchanging glances. He can do whatever he wants—drink, roll in the sand, throw up under the rowan, shout. He is in the party<sup>1</sup>. Very often the neighbors solicitously help him get home.

But they never, ever interfere or comment on the issues in his home. No matter the shouting, the begging. No matter. No matter the breaking glass, the slamming doors. Nobody has ever said anything about it. Never knocked at their door. Never called the police. Even when Agnieszka ran up and down the stairs and the corridors looking for help. Nobody opened the door.

Now Agnieszka doesn't run any more.

Now Ewa no longer complains to her mother.

She doesn't say a word, just puts on makeup.

Nobody helps her.

But she can help Agnieszka. If her husband focuses on Ewa, Agnieszka will have peace.

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<sup>1</sup> The PZPR. The Communist Party of Poland, the most important political party—the *only* political party—during the communist era.

IV.

And again, and again. And again here he is. The dream, the raven. With a different rhyme. Agnieszka doesn't understand what the bird is talking about. She repeats his words to herself—they're so stupid, she wonders if she's missed something.

#

*When the fire comes with hate*

*Human lives it wants to take*

*Pick the most important stuff*

*Go where it is cold and dark*

#

Agnieszka knows from her grandmother that these are supposed to be clues. That there are people who hear and walk in their sleep, then bring back information about the future, but the information is always deceptive because the raven is evil. Agnieszka thinks this is all nonsense. She's eleven and she doesn't believe in fairy tales any more.

But once again she dreams about her mother, standing on the cliff and bleeding. Peonies and red blood stains dance behind Agnieszka's lids for a long time after awakening. And she can still hear the raven's voice.

"You have to guess!" he says. "You have to guess!"

"You have to show me more!" she says. But the raven doesn't want to show more, refuses to say more.

“I am telling you: run. Isn’t it obvious what you need to do?” he caws.

Agnieszka doesn’t want to believe him, she wants to forget. She looks at the sun for so long that she feels pain behind her eyes. It doesn’t help, so she goes down to the basement. She opens their storage compartment and finds a bag of potatoes in the corner. Her grandmother brought them for winter. The potatoes are pretty old and they’ve started to put out roots. The roots make their way through the bag, penetrate the cellar, looking for the way out, like roundworms.

Before she lets herself think about what she’s going to do, she cleans some potatoes and eats them. Raw, including the peel and roots, which are disgusting. Then she eats a more. They taste of earth. Good.

She eats about a kilogram. At the end she can barely swallow.

An hour later she feels terrible. She throws up. She has fever. Her mother’s worried, but even so she waits for Agnieszka’s father to come home from the office to make the decision about whether go to the hospital or not. She walks from one window to another, checking to see if he’s back. She calls his office.

“He’s already left,” she tells Agnieszka.

“Mom, please, take me to the doctor!” Agnieszka pleads. She feels the fever burning her, so intense she is almost deafened by it. Her mouth is parched. “Mom, mom,” she mumbles.

Eventually they go to hospital—it isn’t far. Her mother half carries, half drags Agnieszka behind her. Agnieszka is reeling, but no one stops to help them. This is normal—here nobody

helps. It seems as if no one's paying attention, but they're all watching. They talk to each other about it, but they don't dare ask if Agnieszka is all right.

Agnieszka spends three days in the hospital. When she comes back home, the apartment is a disaster.

"Your father got home while we were at the hospital. He was angry. Because he was worried about you," her mother says. Agnieszka tries not to look at her split lip, at the star-shaped bruise on her chin.

What did she do wrong?

V.

He came back angry—again. Some say it's better to know when life goes according to some scheme, when you can somehow foresee the future, even if the future isn't very bright. They say it's good to know your enemies—better the devil you know.

Ewa doesn't care about this kind of local wisdom. Today she's especially fed up with that approach. Somewhere inside her, deep in the pit of her stomach, something is coming together, rising, some kind of feeling she knows. But it's never been so strong. This is anger. This is resistance. This is revolt.

The feelings are strong and Ewa can't just toss them aside, as she tosses the bed linen into the washing machine to clean it. They're not within her control. They rise, they grow, they inflate. They become powerful. They become independent. They take control. Ewa has the impression that everything is happening without her involvement, that she's just an observer. And she likes what she sees—at least at the start.

"Leave me alone!" she hisses at her husband, like a viper who's been poked with a stick. He doesn't answer. Is he afraid? No, he's surprised—then he gets his voice back.

"You slut!" Grabs her wrist and twists it. Raises his fist.

"Hit me, I don't care. I don't care! I'm used to it!" Ewa screams. Agnieszka comes from her room. She knows what's going to happen. She looks on with big eyes, so big that Ewa almost laughs. "You fucker, wife-beater!" she spits. He hits her. Something explodes in her head, but Ewa's laughing. "Fucker!" she says again.

Agnieszka can see that Ewa isn't going to run or beg for mercy. She just won't—enough is enough. This makes him even angrier—angrier than he's ever been. But Ewa isn't afraid. She's not afraid because she has a plan. She laughs out loud, despite the fact that Agnieszka has started crying. He beats her more cruelly than he's ever beaten her before. Red bloodstains blossom on her peony-printed dress. He hits her in her face. The skin above her eyebrow splits, and blood pours into Ewa's eyes. She swipes them with her hand. She sees that the blood has got under her nails, and her hand is red with it—she's bleeding a lot.

Then Agnieszka rushes in. She pushes her father, but he shoves her away. But Agnieszka doesn't give up. She pushes him again, hard. He falls, hits his head against the wash basin. Loses consciousness for a moment.

When he comes around again, Ewa knows what to say.

“I am leaving you, you sucker. I am taking Agnieszka and I am leaving.” This is her plan. Great plan.

“Go, I will find you no matter where you go and destroy you. You and her. Go, you are free to go, if you like. But remember—there is no escape”

Ewa approaches the door. Puts her hand on the door handle. She sees that the bottom of her dress is soaked in blood, and blood drips from her hand.

She takes her hand back.

She'd better think it through again.

VI.

A few days later Agnieszka gets home from school. She's afraid to come home, but she knows that the fear will eventually pass. It will pass—she can deal with it. She used to be very afraid, but over time she got used to the fear. It's like getting into cold water: at the beginning you feel a shocking, sudden chill, but then it gets better—not great, but better.

She comes home, even though she doesn't want to, and opens the door. Or she tries to open it, but it's locked. This is rare—her mother doesn't work and usually stays at home. But not today. She probably left to do some shopping, or go to dry cleaner. The hairdresser? There are lots of possibilities, but Agnieszka feels fear growing, despite all the sensible explanations. This closed door isn't just a closed door—it represents the end of something.

She'll have to go in if she's going to find out.

She goes in—she has a key, she just doesn't usually need it. She takes her shoes off and calls.

“Mom?”

Nobody answers.

She walks around the flat, checks every room. In the end she enters the kitchen. Her mother isn't here. But there's a piece of paper. In the middle of the table is a piece of paper, folded in half, with “Agnieszka” written on it. She reaches for it, unfolds it slowly. Her hands are shaking.



She reads it. Quickly, once—another time. The paper falls from her hand. Glides towards the floor, slowly, like a leaf.

In the evening, when she goes to bed, the raven comes. He comes and laughs.

“Did you think your mother would take you with her?” he asks.

“Yes!” Agnieszka is crying. “And she’s gone. By herself. Left me a short note. That she can’t stand it anymore and she’s sorry!”

“What did you expect? She went crazy, that’s all there is to it.”

“Maybe she’ll come back?” Agnieszka tries not to let go of hope—hope as weak as a flower stem.

“She won’t.”

“She will. Or maybe she’s dead?” Agnieszka asks.

“I can’t tell you—I don’t know”

“Is she dead? Did she kill herself?”

“I don’t know. Maybe—maybe not.”

“Then she’ll come back.”

“No. As long as he’s here, she won’t.”

“I don’t understand.”

“So think.”

“What would I have to do to make her come back?”

“Think,” caws the raven.

“I have to do something with him. With him—with father”

## VII.

Late in the spring, six months after Agnieszka's mother left—she never contacted the family once, as if the ground had opened under her feet and she had fallen into the abyss—Agnieszka's father invited Lidka to come. He said she was coming for the evening for a drink. Agnieszka shrugged—she didn't care.

At the beginning at least, she didn't care—because later, when Lidka started to come more often, and to stay overnight, Agnieszka started to hate her. Lidka took a place that didn't belong to her. It wasn't her own seat that she took on the sofa in the living room, one leg over another, her hair loose, a glass in her hand. With a cocktail in the glass—Lidka doesn't drink straight vodka, only cocktails. Her friends aren't so sophisticated, though—they drink vodka, even warm. There are more and more of them. They sit in the living room, sometimes traipsing around the flat and coming to Agnieszka's room. She has to lock the door.

Sometimes she drinks, too, but she's careful about it, hides it. Father marks the level on the bottles with a marker. Agnieszka's afraid to wipe a line off and draw another one—father caught her doing this once and hit her. Now she drinks small quantities and fills the bottles up to the line again with water or tea. Sometimes she spits inside—it makes her feel better.

Or she goes out. Goes out and stays out as long as possible. Sometimes she doesn't come back at all and stays with a friend. Or in the basement. It's quite warm there in the winter, though it stinks of potatoes. Sometimes she lies in the potato-smelling darkness and thinks that

she'll never go back home. She'll run. Forever. Steal some money from her father, take some clothes and go. Maybe she'll find her mother? Maybe. Maybe.

"I've got to get rid of Lidka—that's the priority. Then we'll see," she says.

"Right," replies the raven, who accompanies her almost all the time now.

"Can you show me how to do it?" asks Agnieszka.

"Sure!" says the raven. "Let's fly!"

They fly for a long time, so long that Agnieszka gets cold. She doesn't complain—the raven knows what to do. They've been on trips like this before, and all of them ended with some awful vision of violence and pain. Death and fire. Suffering, with no way out. Agnieszka doesn't like those dreams. She has no idea why the raven shows her such nightmares, but it does.

"You have to guess!" he answers.

But not tonight. Tonight Agnieszka doesn't need to guess. Tonight they land in an old factory warehouse. Lidka is in the middle of the hall, tied by her hands to one of the steel beams that supports the ceiling. Naked. Her body is sweaty, but in a disgusting way—the way people sweat on busses in the summer. Agnieszka catches her scent. Lidka smells of fear and Agnieszka likes it.

"These are your assistants!" the raven says, and from the dark corners come creatures—grey, with red, flaming eyes. They're hairy and slimy at the same time. They have long claws and teeth. "They will do whatever you say," the raven tells her.

Agnieszka nods in almost imperceptibly. She points to Lidka. They attack her and rip off her skin, then rip the flesh off her bones. Lidka is screaming, right to the very end—she's crying, and it feels good. Agnieszka feels so good about it. She feels a tickling in her belly.

“Can you really kill her?” she asks the raven.

“Maybe,” he says.

“And him?”

“Your father?”

“Yeah.”

“Maybe, with a little help from you.”

“You got it. Can you show me mom?” When she asks, it makes her want to cry. She misses her mother more than she hates her for leaving. Missing her makes Agnieszka think she might be able to bring her back. “Can you bring her back?” she asks.

“No. I will not do that.”

## VIII.

Agnieszka's grandmother comes for a visit. She rarely comes now that Ewa has gone. She says she has no idea where her daughter is. She swears to God.

"I don't know—she's not at our place," she says to Agnieszka.

"Did she write to you?"

"No."

Agnieszka's disappointed. But she understands that if her mother went to grandmother, her father would have found her there. She has to hide better, farther, deeper. Crouch. Wait. So he doesn't find her. And he can't find her if he's gone. If he just dies. It's logical. The raven confirms it—as long as her father is here, her mother won't be. And Lidka, whom Agnieszka hates, will be.

Her grandmother comes even more rarely, now. Mostly when she knows her father won't be at home. She just needs to check if there are any festivals or celebrations in the area—if there are, then he's guaranteed to be absent for a few days.

"Come with me," she says to Agnieszka. "You can stay with us."

"No."

"Why?"

Agnieszka doesn't answer. What is she supposed to say? That she's thinking about the raven's promise, that it might actually kill her father and his bitch? She's obsessed with the idea. And with the logical conclusion—they disappear, her mother comes back. Her grandmother

isn't going to understand. Agnieszka remembers that she got angry at the fact that she'd even spoken to the raven.

"Because," she replies. "If mom comes back, I'll be here for her," she explains.

IX.

The sky is full of dandelion puffs. Full, covered with them, as if it's been scratched. The puffs fall, drift down, slowly land on the meadow. Agnieszka lies on the grass, her face to the sky. Dandelion puffs sit on her eyelashes, arms, and legs. Agnieszka laughs—they're tickling her.

"Don't laugh, this isn't what it seems!" says the raven. Right—he's here, this is a dream. The raven is right beside her. He brought her here. "I brought you here, so you can read the prophecy!" he caws.

His ominous voice makes Agnieszka see. These aren't dandelion puffs, they're parachutes. Parachutes that the planes have spit out, planes circulating high in the sky. Agnieszka sits up and she can see that she's not the only one watching them. There are a lot of people around her, all looking up. They squint, looking into the sun.

Suddenly, the sun explodes. Fire rains down from the sky, falling on the spectators, falling on Agnieszka too. She can feel the burning. She begins to scream as fire burns through her body. It leaves black holes, like bullet holes. Agnieszka runs, but there's no place to hide—a hail of fire everywhere.

"Help! Help!" she calls to the raven.

The sky disappears, and suddenly Agnieszka is back in her room again. She's in her bed, breathing quickly.

"I saved you, since you made a wise choice," the raven says. "You didn't leave with your grandma—you stayed. Good girl."

"And the dream? What was it about?"

"A rain of fire."

"Is it related to Lidka and my father?"

"It's supposed to be."

"How? Where? When?"

#

*A thousand years, a lot it is*

*Don't you think my dear?*

*For the millennium's sake*

*The ground hits the plane.*

#

And that's all he says.



X.

Agnieszka eats dinner with her father. They hardly talk, just eat. She tries not to bang her plate with her fork. She knows she has to ask him if she's going to figure out what the dream was about. The dream with the dandelions puffs, which will tell her how to get rid of him.

"How is your work?" she asks to begin the conversation.

"Good," her father replies.

"Well... are you travelling somewhere just now?"

"No," he says. Gets up. Agnieszka gets it—no more talking. She gets up too. "I'm not going anywhere. We have the Polish millennium in a week"

"Oh, good," Agnieszka says as calmly as she can, but inside she's singing.

"I'm going to an air show"

"May I go with you?"

"Maybe. I don't know if I'll stay long. It's going to be hot"

"Please, let's go! Take me with you! Please! I really want to see it!" Agnieszka pleads. Her father looks at her, stunned. She's never behaved like this, never asked for anything, never begged. But now she has to.

#

On the day of the show she irons his shirt. Of course Lidka wasn't about to do it. She just dolls herself up in the hall and makes comments. Drinks her drinks, gets pretty drunk.

Agnieszka's father too.

For the first time, Agnieszka doesn't care. The raven visited her early in this morning and showed her the dandelions again. Repeated his rhyme. Agnieszka is sure she knows what will happen.

She helps her father put his shirt on. Ties his tie. When he goes to the bathroom to do his hair, she cleans his shoes.

She sticks her tongue out at Lidka—things can't be too different, she mustn't suspect anything.

She dresses up. She's ready.

XI.

Summer, 1965, in Katowice. A huge air show celebrates the fact that exactly a millennium before, Poland converted to Christianity and became a sovereign country. All the officials from the area have gathered at Muchowiec airport, as have many ordinary people. The event is enormously expensive—some people say absurdly so.

Agnieszka's father sits in a special section. He'd planned to stay in the shade under the trees that grow around the runway rather than stay in the hot sun, but Agnieszka has convinced him to go to the platform. He agreed, surprised by her stubbornness. And he agreed because the platform was actually pretty comfortable. Plus, he can see everything from there and be seen by his subordinates. Lidka sits by his side. A bit farther along, and lower, in the kids' section, sits Agnieszka. She stays as far from her father as possible. She looks at him and at the preparations,

checking over and over to be sure that he's still in the right spot. He can't move! It's the perfect position, just where he's meant to be.

The planes take off on time. First there's an air acrobatics show. The planes release trails of colorful smoke, like carnival streamers, diving and somersaulting. People applaud, but the applause is drowned out by the roaring of the jets engines. Agnieszka claps too, though she feels some stiffness in her neck. Something seems to be whirling inside her head because of constantly looking up at the sky. Faster and faster. She can't recognize the words the people beside here are saying. She applauds louder.

Then it's time for the parachutes to begin. Big planes, with huge, pregnant bellies, take the skydivers up. They manage to take off—they're so heavy that Agnieszka wasn't sure they'd be able to, but they do, going so high she can hardly see them anymore.

People started to jump out of the planes. Dressed in colorful uniforms, easily visible against the whitish sky of summer. They hold hands, forming patterns, like stars.

Agnieszka's father is the first one to see that something's wrong. One of the planes starts to smoke, releasing a black cloud behind it. It tries to turn, to get away from the others, but the giant machine won't respond to the pilot's commands.

The pilot of one of the other planes doesn't see what's going on. They crash. *Thud*. The fuel tanks explode. Fragments of outer skin of the plane fall off, hot from the explosion, glaring red. Bigger parts of the airframe, too.

People try to run. They stumble over each other, some falling, and those still on their feet trample on the ones on the ground. All of them screaming. The smell of fuel and burnt human flesh rises over the airport. And the noise of the screams.

Agnieszka doesn't move, even though she's bumped and shoved by people as they flee. She moves just a few steps, from one spot to another to see better. Looks at the sky, knows what's coming.

One of the largest pieces hits the officials' section. Her section. She sees a flash. And nothing more, only light. And a feeling much like the one she had when she saw the fireworks for the first time. Ecstasy, joy, a love of life. A sense that the world is a good place. That she can find her place in it. The brightness flashes again, more fireworks, and Agnieszka feels like clapping her hands.

XII.

She opens her eyes. In place of the light and eternity, she sees a room. Ceiling, yellow—  
walls, colorful. Bed, metal. Window, blacked out.

“Where am I?”

Legs, not working. Hands, connected to drips. Pain. Pain, so bright. So strong.

“What happened?” she asks. Tongue, stiff. Pain.

“You got what you wanted, congratulations on guessing!” answers the raven. He bows.

“What about him? My father?” Skin, burning.

“Dead.”

“And what about me?” Agnieszka asks hurriedly. Small drops of her saliva fall on the  
raven’s feathers.

The raven shakes himself off and opens his wings.

“Don’t worry. I will take care of you,” he promises. “I will take care. You will die—die  
tonight.”

# ABSOLUTE SUNSET



kata mlek

Free Preview

**Absolute Sunset**

Kata Mlek

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# CONTENTS

1: Good Evening .....	1	21: My Raven, My Friend .....	117
2: Look at the Sun and Forget .....	7	22: Her and Not Her .....	127
3: A Torrent .....	15	23: The Funeral .....	131
4: Beneath the Surface.....	21	24: Silent Murderer.....	133
5: A Dull, Late Morning.....	25	25: A Dream Book.....	141
6: A Ball of Tears.....	33	26: Guests, Guests.....	149
7: The Bottom of the Bottle .....	37	27: A New Friend.....	153
8: A Brother .....	41	28: Time to Go .....	157
9: I Don't Want You .....	47	29: The Circus .....	159
10: Keep The Child Safe .....	51	30: The Journey of a Lifetime .....	163
11: Baptism .....	55	31: Didn't I Mention.....	167
12: Love is Blind.....	65	32: Dead Silence.....	171
13: A Blue Balloon.....	71	33: I'm Normal.....	183
14: With a Lover .....	73	34: Home, Sweet Home.....	191
15: Sometimes I'm a Father .....	81	35: A Way of Life .....	199
16: Last Journey .....	85	36: Board Any Train.....	211
17: There Will Be No Dinner .....	93	37: The Comeback.....	217
18: Prison.....	97	38: A Happy Ending.....	221
19: Disappear From My Life .....	107	How to Get The Book.....	21
20: Half Orphan.....	113	About the Author.....	23
		Books by Kata Mlek.....	25







# 1

## *Hanka—Good Evening*

“Good evening.” The raven bowed politely. His black eye glittered like a lump of coal, as sorrowful as a slag heap outside a mine, where nothing more will grow.

“Good evening!” Hanka answered, equally politely. She sat down and smoothed the collar of her pyjamas—pink, with broderie anglaise. The holes, hemmed with thick thread, formed a nice, flowery pattern. It was unusual and much too elegant for pyjamas.

“How’re things going?” the bird asked chattily, taking a few steps along the bed frame. He held it tightly to keep from falling, scratching the pine-wood a bit with his claws.

“Nothing special,” Hanka sniffed, putting a small pillow on her head. Perched there, it resembled the pointed hat of a clown puppet.

“Oh well, life, the usual” the raven said, making meaningless small talk for no reason that Hanka could see. He scraped his bill against the edge of the headboard several times, then jumped down onto the duvet, flapping his wings to keep his balance on the bumps as he came closer to Hanka. He jumped up to her shoulder and rootled in her hair with his bill. Finding an elastic band, he caught it firmly and pulled it from her ponytail. He liked hair accessories, especially colourful hairbands.

For a moment he was silent, busy tearing the rubber to pieces. When he finished, he raked up the fragments with his claws and jumped back to the headboard. He took a few steps to the left and a few to the right. Then

he shook his head and stretched his wings wide, so that the feathers spread, forming a web. He stood extended for a moment, then abruptly snapped back into his usual pose with a flap.

“So, what? Shall we peck?” he asked eventually.

“No, please, don’t peck at me,” Hanka begged. “My nails are clean!” she stretched out her hand as proof.

“Ears?” The raven didn’t give up.

“I washed them yesterday.”

“And nose?”

“I haven’t got a runny nose.”

“Nothing to be pecked up?”

“Absolutely nothing!” Hanka rested her hand on her heart.

“Then shall we take wing?” the bird asked.

“Yes,” Hanka agreed.

And they did. They flew for a long time, so long that Hanka became cold, her back covered with goose pimples. She began to sneeze. Finally they saw water below.

“We’ll stop here,” said the raven, descending. Hanka followed as if she were attached to him by an invisible leash.

The bird landed by the side of a small decorative pool, such as might be home to koi. It was rectangular, with walls that were slippery with algae and rough with the barnacles. Here and there, white wall tiles glistened in the cloudy water. Hanka didn’t like it at all.

“I want to fly farther!” she said, going into a sulk and stamping her bare feet.

“It’s not your decision,” the bird said, cutting her off. He flapped his wings and took to the air briefly, pecking her firmly on the head. A bead of blood appeared in her hair. Hanka understood: no “buts.”

She sat down beside the pool. She felt like crying. The place where the bird had pecked her smarted, and she bent over the mercury surface to see whether the wound was still bleeding. The sky reflected in the water as if it were a mirror.

In spite of the shimmer, she glimpsed fish near the bottom of the pool. They were as large as burdock leaves and moved slowly, arching their bodies. Their scales gleamed in the sun.

“Oh, those are rays!” She was delighted at the sight and forgot about the peck on her head. “Stingrays, in fact. I saw some once on TV. Stingrays!” she announced proudly, and the raven nodded.

“Right,” he confirmed, dipping his bill beneath the surface of the water to drink.

“Agata will never believe me if I tell her!” Hanka leapt up and ran along the edge of the pool. “Real stingrays!” she crowed. The fish mostly milled around in the depths, once in a while sneaking up to a point just under the surface.

“Would you like to touch them?” the bird asked politely, even gently. Hanka went on the alert. The ingratiating tone in his voice was usually a bad omen.

“No, it’s dangerous!” she jumped away from the edge and wrapped her arms around herself. “Do you see those spines?” she pointed at the ribbon-like tail of a ray swimming nearby. “Those are no decoration, they’re a deadly weapon, venomous. The poison kills slowly and painfully. That’s what they said on TV, on the Discovery channel.”

“I’m afraid that you have to face the risk, my dear,” the raven said, suddenly changing tone. “You must catch them!”

“How?” Hanka looked around for a javelin or a trident, but saw nothing at all. Emptiness surrounded her. Not a desert, just the lack of anything. *How am I supposed to catch the rays with nothing?* she wondered. The raven, however, wasn’t bothered by the lack of equipment.

“You will catch them by hand. There’s an old fisherman’s technique called noodling,” he suggested. “Put your hand in the water. They like hands. A ray will grab your fingers, and then you pull your hand out and the ray comes with it. Go on!” The bird hissed like a snake and puffed up his feathers.

For a moment Hanka felt defiance rising up in her. She wanted to grab that wispy neck and bend it like a straw. The delicate spine of the bird would snap and she would have a nice, satisfying corpse instead of the raven. The

impulse disappeared almost immediately, though. She wasn't supposed to disobey. The choice was obvious: fish or be pecked. Not an ordinary peck, like when he cleaned her, but something serious: drawing blood, down to the bone. Just imagining it, Hanka got so scared she momentarily needed to pee. It would be better to take her chances with rays.

She sighed heavily and rolled her sleeves up to her shoulders. Her messy hair tickled her face as she kneeled and leaned towards the water. She brushed it away with her shoulder and put her hand into the pool cautiously, at first just a little, then up to the elbow. The water was tepid, neither cold nor warm. Strange. It horrified Hanka even more than iciness or boiling temperatures would have done.

The fish spotted her immediately. They began to circulate, more and more quickly, rising from the bottom towards the bait. Careful but greedy, they came closer and closer. She could see their bulging eyes, watery and slimy, like egg white. Pale bellies flashed from time to time. Hanka began to cry.

The first stingray's firm bite drew blood from her hand. Red rings dispersed in the water and after a while another fish came, attracted by the meaty smell. Hanka screamed and tore her hand out of water. But the ray didn't let go, holding on grimly with sharp, hooked teeth. Still attached, it flailed in the air above her head, only letting go when Hanka slapped it against the edge of the pool. For a moment the ray flapped against the flagstones, then finally flopped over and lay still, reminding Hanka of a wet jelly ear mushroom. She vomited on a nearby bush.

"Well, well!" the raven cawed, jumping towards the dead stingray. He pecked out the fishy eyes and gobbled them down with gusto. The only other treats he consumed so avidly were the bone-dry scabs that he peeled back from Hanka's pale calves and the dirt from under her nails. She watched him, disgusted, clenching her wrist. The blood was clotting slowly. The raven pecked at a little bit of the vomit and shook himself in distaste. It didn't appeal to him.

"Is it enough?" Hanka asked, hoping the bird was full.

"No. I want more!" the raven demanded. "Hand in the water, now!"

Hanka eventually caught four more fish, the third one gnawing a fair bit on her forearm. But the bird was still unsatisfied.

“More, more!” he cawed and wheezed, pecking at Hanka’s ankles, and she went back to fishing. The raven promised that when he was full he’d stop stabbing at her and they would go home.

Now the rays were less cautious. Their gills moved quickly, as if they were panting with excitement. Blood must have blunted their instincts. They weren’t afraid of coming close to the surface, which churned with waves stirred up by their covetous bodies. It was an underwater orgy. Hanka, numbed by pain, didn’t care. “He’ll eat and we’ll go home, he’ll eat and we’ll fly away,” she repeated to herself, clenching her teeth.

The next fish struck the moment she dipped her fingers into the water.

“Ouch!” Hanka cried when she felt the teeth of the stingray cut her to the bone.

She immediately tried to get up and drag the fish ashore, but the ray was huge and held powerfully to her hand. Hanka couldn’t even stand up. Unlike the other fish, this one refused to give up and let her go. Instead, it began to drag her into the water. Dangling its tail and beating its fins, it pulled Hanka toward the pool.

“Help me!” she cried, but the raven watched indifferently. Hanka tried to yank quickly backward, but she slipped and tumbled into the swimming pool.

Water immediately flooded her lungs and the pressure in her head was overwhelming, but at least it was easier to fight the stingray once she was in the pool. Hanka kicked it firmly and the fish let her hand go. She managed to surface for a second.

“Help me get out!” she called out to the bird. She tried to climb up the poolside, but it was covered in algae and slippery as a sheet of melting ice.

“No,” the raven replied.

“Please, help me!” Hanka kept trying to get out the pool, but the stingrays were biting her legs, holding her there.

“Get into water and catch them!” The bird pecked Hanka on the head. Stunned, she slipped away from the edge and went down, where the fish took care of her. They tore her pyjamas off, poking her with their tails, gnawing

at the soft parts of her thighs and belly. Hanka screamed and water poured into her mouth. From time to time she managed to get her head above the surface and catch her breath. In the moments she was above the water, she could hear the raven repeating a nonsensical rhyme:

*Deep water reaches silent ears  
Below—surprise—are lurking fears  
You'll never leave these depths of green  
Because you can't avoid the sting.*

The raven went through the rhyme over and over again. Whenever Hanka managed to approach the edge of the pool, he would jump forward and push her back into the water. She ran out of breath, and the fish never paused, stabbing her and nibbling at her from every direction. *I'll try one last time*, she decided and pushed off the bottom of the pool with her legs. It worked. Her head burst through the surface abruptly, like a buoy surfacing.

“Dad, dad!” Hanka cried out and sank again.



## 2

### *Janusz—Look at the Sun and Forget*

“Damn it, she’s howling again!” Sabina, who was sleeping on the left, muttered. Her breath smelled of digested dry wine. Traces of *Oui Oui* perfume, which she considered chic, still clung to her dirty hair. She preferred to spray her braid with it, rather than simply wash the hair. She turned onto her other side and hid her head under a pillow. Her unbuttoned nightdress revealed a flabby breast. Nothing interesting in here. Janusz felt like going out on the balcony to breathe some fresh air in order to clear both the sight and the smell of her from his memory.

“Dad, dad!” came a sudden call from the other room. Now he realized what had actually woken him up. He threw back the stale duvet, which fell to the floor with a sound like a snort and sprang to his feet. Stumbling over his flat slippers, he ran to Hanka’s room. His daughter’s voice was so urgent that his mouth went bone dry. He took a sharp bend behind the wardrobe, skidding on the beaten rug, and in a few more bounds reached her bed.

She sat with her eyes wide open, probably unaware that she had woken. Her small palms clenched repeatedly, as if catching something she saw in her dreams. Sweaty pyjamas stuck to her skinny back like a cape soaked in a downpour. Janusz felt a lump in his throat.

“Calm down, calm down,” he whispered as he sat down beside her. “Quiet.” He hugged her shaking body and smoothed down her messy hair.

Hanka was so slight. Small even for seven years old, but smart. Blood of his blood! She had always woken up in the night calling Janusz, having



terrible dreams, which she couldn't describe. Each time he came to her she would whimper and sob, then slowly fall asleep in her father's arms. Sometimes he sat with her until dawn, unable to bear to put her back to bed. It was their time to be on their own. The birds would begin to sing outside the window at dawn, rushing to start the day for no clear reason.

As usual, Janusz looked at the dying light of the street lamps outside and whispered calming mantras. In the distance he could see the pit shafts wrapped in fog and smog, bleak and hopeless. Red lights flashed at the tops of the chimneys, as if it were the sex district. The neighbour's miniature pinscher barked squeakily, keenly, on the stairs.

"Fuck! Hush him up!" Janusz heard Sabina's voice coming from the bedroom and he shook his head. So pathetic.

Once, Sabina lost her temper with the dog, which had been barking right under her window, and threw a cake tray in its direction. Then two fistfuls of nuts. Janusz had to go and ask forgiveness—forgiveness for his wife's behaviour, as always. He had often apologized for Sabina to their neighbours in the *Tysiąclecie*<sup>1</sup> estate. She simply loved to yell angrily at people. Once someone slapped her. She had been completely drunk and, to be honest, she'd deserved it. Janusz glanced toward the bedroom to see if his irritated wife was crawling out toward them. Silence. Good. He wasn't going back there.

He'd been married to Sabina for ten years now, but still couldn't understand her. He could understand that she hated her dream being derailed, but his wife's attitude towards Hanka astounded him. It looked like giving birth to Hanka was the first and the last thing Sabina would ever do for her. And she hadn't wanted to even do that. If she'd the choice, she'd have preferred to have an abortion. Janusz gave a heavy sigh. Sometimes he thought all he did was let out damned sighs.

His own mother had always taken care of him, always by his side to feed him, to wash him, to change his clothes, to dress his scrapes and bruises. An exemplary housewife. Sabina didn't bother about things like that, even though she didn't have a job to take up her time. Apparently, women differed

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(1) "Millenium." A term for estates that were built under communism on the thousandth anniversary of the founding of Poland.

from each other. Oh well, such is life. Janusz hugged his daughter even more firmly.

“What did you dream about?” he asked gently, kissing Hanka’s cold cheek.

“Spikes. I was in the water, and there were spikes everywhere. Fish were stinging me. And there was a raven. He didn’t want to help me. I was afraid. I called, but nobody came to help me. I was swimming in the pool and I couldn’t get out. Water, water—I couldn’t breathe! They bit my hands! They stung me!” Hanka burst in tears.

“Don’t worry, it’s just a dream,” Janusz assured her. It was not the first time that she’d told him about the raven. Everyone has his own tried and tested nightmare, and clearly Hanka had her bird. “You’ll look at the sun in the morning and you’ll forget. You will forget.”

Hanka calmed down slowly. Her body became slack and her breath became even, like the ticking of a clock. Janusz gently laid her on the bed and stretched himself out on the floor. He was a bit sleepy. He looked at the cracked ceiling, as empty thoughts crossed his mind. There was nothing really to think about.

“Sleep my darling, you’ll forget looking at the sun,” he murmured to sleeping Hanka, and closed his eyes.



As always, Janusz was the one to prepare breakfast for Hanka and himself. He put a bowl of cereal in front of her. Without milk, since the girl hated it—she would sometimes vomit even at the smell of it. He slurped his coffee. It was as sour as the juice of a pickle. The shops sold only rubbish these days—shit and rubbish. Maybe if they could afford Jacobs instead of Fuego it wouldn’t be so acidic. The acidosis of poverty. Janusz shrugged and scolded himself for his pessimism. Sometimes he was fed up with his own behaviour.

“Did you sleep well?” he asked his daughter, pretending that he didn’t remember her night terrors. He forced himself to smile, then realized that he actually felt like smiling. And why not? Against all odds!

“Yes, dad,” Hanka replied, crunching her food mercilessly and spilling cereal around. Janusz reached for the brush. He had to sweep—if Sabina

stepped on crumbs, there'd be a row. And Sabina used Hanka as her punching bag.

"Did you dream about anything?" he mumbled, crawling under his daughter's chair.

"No, nothing at all. Why?" Hanka was swinging her legs.

"No reason. Did you look out the window this morning? The weather looks fine, doesn't it?"

"Yeah. I looked. The magpie was sitting on the rowan. The branch almost broke!" She laughed.

"Well. Great," Janusz said, pouring breadcrumbs into the trashcan. He put the dustpan back carefully. Even though Sabina didn't clean, she hated chaos. And she had an exceptional memory—every single thing had its place. He finished off his coffee and took a bite of a slice of stale bread. Then he decided there was nothing more to say and threw the kaiser roll with cheese into his briefcase.

"Well, I got to go!" He smiled at his daughter and stood.

Hanka dug gloomily in the slit of the table with her nail. She moved it slowly, and dirty fat rolled up from between the tiles, black and sticky. She hunched as though she were ducking a blow. Sabina often pummelled her, hitting her and calling her a moron. Janusz felt suffocated by a single thought: that in the morning his wife would undoubtedly wake up mad and drill Hanka. But he had to go.

He slowly put on his jacket and bent down for his briefcase. When he straightened up, he saw that Hanka was half standing, half hanging loosely from the kitchen doorframe, watching him.

"Bye!" he whispered, and she waved to him and went to her room. In all likelihood she'd sit there for a while, until nine or so, when Sabina would get up and send her to school. But for him it was really the time to go!

He went out into the corridor and for a moment fought with the temptation to slam the door as hard as he could. Hard enough to make the plaster fall from walls and to wake the sleeping harpy up. She'd jump out of the bedding as though she'd been scalded, and then her headache would begin to torture her. Good! Still, he managed to resist the urge and closed the door

carefully. As long as Sabina was sleeping, Hanka would have peace and quiet. Maybe his wife would wake up in decent shape for once.

Janusz ran down the stairs, his feet gliding over the edges of steps. He was neither sliding nor quite walking. Like when he was fifteen and rushed toward friends waiting downstairs. That was all that was left to him of his youth, this silly rush down the stairs.

He hurried through the metal door, which closed with a squeak. He didn't look back, just headed towards the bus stop, fighting with the wind all the way. By the time he reached the passage between the blocks of flats, the fine weather from early morning hours was over. The once blue sky clouded over and it started raining. Not hard, but even a downpour would have been better, if only because it would be less persistent. Sometimes it seemed to Janusz that it rained exclusively for him. As soon as he got outside, rain appeared out of nowhere.

The drops left grey streaks on his jacket. Rain in Katowice looked like something foul had been dissolved in it—not like the crystal clear water that Janusz's mother had used to wash her hair so long ago. "It's the healthiest way to get a beautiful plait!" she would laugh, with her breasts rocking to the side as she soaked her hair in a bucket.

Obviously, he didn't have an umbrella. And as usual, he had gone out wearing loafers, which got soaked the first few steps. Damn it! Another day in damp footwear. Another wonderful day.

People crowded beneath the roof of the bus stop, repeatedly stepping on each other's feet and apologising, and bumping each other with bags and files. They seethed in the plastic shelter, grey and a little shaggy, like moths in a jar.

Janusz somehow managed to shelter under the roof while he waited. The steam wafting above the crowd smelled of potatoes and cabbage. So typical of Silesia—the smell was literally everywhere. He raised his collar and pressed his nose into it. Since Sabina rarely cooked, the fabric hadn't yet picked up the odour of stewed meat and beetroots.

A horde of stray dogs ran across the field behind the stop. They barked at each other, rushing after a piece of rubbish driven by the wind. A few of them limped. They often attacked people, mainly kids and old ladies, but

they were intimidated by the crowd at the bus stop, running past while casting a few bleary-eyed looks at it.

Surprisingly, the bus came on time. Full. Passengers flattened against the windows could barely breathe. Janusz jumped onto the step and leaned back. The door closed with a hiss, and he was immediately shoved back by the crowd and pressed against the window pane. If the door opened suddenly, he would undoubtedly fall into the street. His skull would crack, his blood would stream. They would rob him of his briefcase and wallet, and then call the police. He couldn't decide whether he wanted it to happen or feared it.

The stink of dirty clothes made him nauseous. Why wash your clothes every day? They'll get dirty at work anyhow. Janusz jumped out of the vehicle every time it stopped in order to let passengers out and to let new ones in. Then he crammed inside last just so he could enjoy the fresh air as long as possible. It may not have been bracing and crystalline, but at least didn't cause him to retch. In the end, exhausted from jumping in and out and pushing into the crowd, he got off the bus two stops early.

His mine appeared at the end of the street—a straight one, built just for his unit. Once a great power, the Śląska<sup>2</sup> mine had become a bottomless budget money pit. Old, creased photographs of the opening and other important events hung on the walls of the cloakroom. It was hard to believe that such things have ever happened here, that someone had actually gotten some record-breaking results. Today, in a time when the expression “black gold” provokes nothing but laughter, miners, longing for an early, generous retirement, weren't mining a lot. Even if they'd wanted to do more, they didn't have the equipment. They were going underground because it was something their grandfathers and fathers had done. For glory. For tradition. Janusz was an accountant, though, not an actual miner. One of mediocre pencil-pushers in a small department, just ten people all together. Sabina despised his job. “If you were harder, you'd go down!” she said, mocking him.

In the past, when the miners' position had been better, he'd been satisfied at his job. No risk, reliable profits, and access to the mining shops!<sup>3</sup> But

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(2) *Silesian*.

(3) *Under the communist regime in Poland, certain stores were only open to miners, while ordinary people suffered from the lack of even basic food, clothes, and*

today? He does mundane chores: stamping bills, printing chits. Waiting for retirement. Thank God he could retire early! Then he would start his own accounting office and take his work home. Or he'd simply work from home! He'd buy the neatest school bag ever for Hanka, and colour felt-tip pens. He'd be able to save a little money for her university!

Janusz, his mind fixed on his glowing future, didn't even notice that he'd already reached the gate. He kicked it, but without much force.

"I'm coming, sir, I'm coming!" a bumbling voice answered on the other side.

After a moment the gate opened. Not proudly, not wide open, but timidly, as if it were the gate to a beleaguered fortress. Janusz slipped inside. Behind him the metal wing thumped loudly shut.

---

*household items. Many miners made an extra income by selling goods at a profit to people who weren't allowed in the special shops.*





# 3

## *Hanka—A Torrent*

A few days later, Hanka woke up very early. She felt well rested and alert. The raven didn't come to her that night. She told him she wouldn't be able to meet him because of the fishing trip with dad. The raven had promised not to appear so that Hanka could get enough sleep, and he'd kept his word. He wasn't that bad at all.

The leaves of the rowan tree rustled outside the window. It was really something, the rowan. In an urban estate like *Tysiaclecie*, which had once been fancy but which hadn't aged well, nobody really cared about trees. But Hanka had her own rowan, right outside her window. In autumn the tree's branches were covered in orange fruit and Hanka was the first one to see them. They actually kind of belonged to her. She was the one to decide who might pick them and how many—there were always more children who wanted to pick the fruit than there was fruit on the tree.

She sat down on the bed and stuck her head out the window, just a little bit, but enough to take a look outside. Rowan-tree fruit had already appeared, but they were still pale. It was only July—there was time. She lay down again and waited for the sun to climb above the roofs and heat up the asphalt paths. Only then, feeling the oppressive summer atmosphere, did she get up.

She headed to the kitchen. The table top, covered with greenish tiles, was pleasantly cool. The kitchen, facing west, hadn't yet been heated up to the point where it seemed like an oven. Hanka took a knife out of the drawer,



sat down on a chair, and started digging dirt out from between the tiles, as usual. She waited for her parents to get up.

Janusz was the first to appear. He drank a glass of water in a hurry and disappeared into the bathroom. Soon after, the girl learnt why. Her mother, looking battered, leaned out of the bedroom.

Hanka remembered when Sabina was pretty. Even fairly recently her mother had been beautiful. Her red, shiny hair would be tied in a braided bun, or she'd curl it, or just let it fall loose to her waist. Two pairs of high heels had stood in the wardrobe, one black and one silver, ready to go for a walk anytime. Where were they now? Where were these shoes? All that remained was a pair of worn out, unfashionable carpet slippers. Hanka was pretty sure that Sabina had worn green and blue eye shadow once upon a time. Or purple. It wasn't so long ago, maybe two years back. Or three. Back when Sabina still made an effort, when she still cared. Even if only about her own appearance.

Today's Sabina had nothing in common with that earlier incarnation. Sometimes it was hard to believe that this woman, with a cigarette always dangling between her lips, was the same person as the one in the old photographs with the serrated edges. Hanka sometimes looked through them, taking careful precautions not to be caught. Sabina didn't like the photos. Once, when she'd caught her daughter going through the albums, she'd torn several of the photos into pieces, then cried, howling into her pillow. So secrecy was essential or else, soon, not a single souvenir would record Sabina's beauty! Her mother's fury would turn them into dust.

"Impossible," the girl thought, comparing today's Sabina with the younger one. Where did the bits of clumped lipstick in the corners of her lips come from? And the fierce expression? Hanka couldn't accept that she no longer had the mother in the photos, with the cream-coloured retro dress and shining, polished nails. She missed her. And sometimes she was simply ashamed of her.

While Hanka sat wondering whether a *bebok*<sup>1</sup> hadn't perhaps kidnapped that distant mother and brought Sabina here in her place—some-

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(1) A *bebok* is a mythical creature that, in local lore, is believed to substitute an evil baby for a good one, among other tricks.

thing that every child knows the Silesian devils sometimes do—Sabina was struggling with breakfast. The bread kept moving on the cutting board. She tried to cut it into slices with shaking hands, but the pieces looked as if they'd been cut with a chainsaw. It was better not to comment, though. In the end Sabina hurled some sandwiches to the table. They were nothing like the ones in the magazines, with cucumber, tomato and radish. Hanka would have loved a sandwich like that, a lot, but her mother never made anything of the kind. Bread, butter, cold meat, jam, or cheese curds—nothing sophisticated.

“You must have lost your fucking ass!” Sabina said harshly when Hanka asked her to sprinkle the cheese curds with chives. Hanka had eaten sandwiches like that next door, at her friend Agata's, and they tasted really good.

Hanka chewed slowly, trying to swallow the pieces without the benefit of tea since Sabina hadn't served anything to drink today. She could hardly get the bread down, but it was better not to complain.

“I'm not your housemaid!” Sabina would hiss at her in response to even a minor request. It was better to say nothing.

Fortunately, Janusz appeared a moment later. He came out of the bathroom dressed in old sports trousers and a T-shirt. He smelt of Nivea cream and some kind of aftershave. He didn't actually shave, but he used it as a perfume because he knew that Hanka liked the smell.

“Oh, you have nothing to drink!” He came over to Hanka and put the kettle on the gas. “Coffee?” he turned to Sabina, but she just snorted. He shrugged his shoulders and prepared two teas. His wife, perhaps offended with the sight of them, left for the living room.

“Thanks!” Hanka muttered to her father, and he smiled in response.

“Drink up and we'll go. Mum probably didn't get enough sleep,” he laughed and moved his eyebrows. Hanka snorted, but immediately went quiet, stopped by a warning gesture from her father. It wasn't wise to provoke Sabina, who hated being mocked. They quickly packed a bottle of water and two apples into a plastic bag. The fishing tackle was waiting in the hall, where Janusz had put it the previous evening. They put their sneakers on and left. Sabina didn't bother to say goodbye.

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(2) A local expression used to describe a person who demands too much. Similar to the expression “to lose one's mind.”

Right downstairs, Hanka started to chatter. She felt better as she disappeared from Sabina's view. *Sorry, of mum's view.* Being with her father was good. Hanka laughed and told him incredible stories. She didn't even notice where they were going. He was leading them, wasn't he? Sitting on the bus, she realised that she didn't remember either the walk to the bus stop or the moment when they'd boarded.

The trip wasn't long. On the way they passed meadows that were as flat and featureless as a pancake, here and there decorated with a single tree. Just like on postcards from Jura<sup>3</sup>. Hanka wanted to stop by one of these solitary trees someday, spread a blanket and fall asleep. Dream of nothing. Or eat breakfast there. Maybe eventually she'd be able to talk her father into it.

"We're getting off soon," Janusz said, interrupting her thoughts as he started gathering their things. As always, he checked that they hadn't left anything on the bus. Hanka found it funny, given that all they had was one net and a fishing rod. She snorted quietly, then politely waited by the door.

As soon as the bus stopped, she jumped out into the roadside dust, which rose as high as her knees and settled on her socks. She glanced at her father. Nothing. He didn't even notice. He has never been bothered by such things. Sabina would probably have whacked Hanka in the head.

They made their way through a forest. A few isolated clumps of wild strawberries grew near the path. Hanka raced from one to another, picking the red fruit cautiously and then savouring it. Nothing could equal fresh wild strawberries. Even the smell couldn't be imitated. Sabina had bought wild strawberry cream once and it stank.

"You want some, daddy?" Hanka shouted to Janusz, who was trailing a little bit behind.

"No, thanks. Wait by the turn because I'm not keeping up!" he laughed and adjusted the bag with the fishing rod, jumping from side to side in a funny way.

The river appeared as soon as they took the turn. Hanka rushed through the waterside meadow, jumping over cowpats. From time to time she stopped to pick a handful of the sorrel and put it into her mouth. Sabina forbid her to eat unwashed leaves, afraid of tapeworms. She wasn't here, though.

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(3) *A region in Poland.*

Hanka actually felt a bit sorry that her mother has never gone with her and her father. She didn't know what she was missing, not seeing the spot where they always fished. It was near the bus stop, on the low, sandy bank. A very deep bight was hidden under a tree that grew out over the water. Janusz said it was two, or even three metres deep. Amongst the sunken roots, fish were drowsing. They glistened between the mossy boughs, as crooked as the fingers of the old ladies at church. It was enough if you tempted the fish with good bait—they'd open their eyes and immediately take the hook. Later, Janusz and Hanka cleaned them and prepared them for cooking at home. They'd cover them with breadcrumbs, fry them, and finally eat them. Her mother had never even tried one of the barbel they caught! "They're toxic, stuffed with rubbish from the river. Everything is contaminated here!" she would complain, refusing to take a bite. It made Hanka sad. Probably Janusz too.

In the end they reached the spot. Hanka lay down on the grass, and Janusz peeked at the bottom of the bank, unfolding the equipment and casting with the fishing rod.

"Can I have something to drink?" Hanka asked. She was thirsty after her insane run. She swallowed water, then lay down again. Crickets chirped around her while she remained silent not to startle the fish.

She was almost asleep, when her father jumped to his feet.

"Got it!" he whispered and pulled on the rod. Hanka sat down straight. "Strong one!" He looked happy, pulling back on the rod once more.

The fish tumbled over and came up to the surface. Hanka noticed its green sides and bright belly.

"Pike! Dad, it's a pike!" She smiled broadly. Pikes were rare. And tasty. Especially with onion, according to Hanka. But they left their secret hiding spots, covered with calamus, unwillingly. They were fast and careful. "Like every predator," Janusz had explained to Hanka.

Janusz concentrated on the fish and Hanka, nervous and suddenly hungry, took a walk along the shore. Her father was doing well with the pike, so long as the line didn't get jammed.

“Goddamn!” he muttered annoyed. “It’s caught between the roots,” he put the fishing rod back on its stand and took his shirt off. “I’ll get in and get it out—maybe I’ll catch the fish, too.”

He took off his shoes and unzipped his trousers. He placed them together in a neat little pile, then stood up, bent into a bow, his hands forming an arrow. He was going to dive.

“No!” Hanka suddenly shouted, grabbing him by the elbow. “Don’t dive!”

Janusz smiled indulgently, patiently trying to explain.

“Hania,” he explained. “Wait here and I’ll get the fly line out, it’s expensive.”

But Hanka wasn’t giving up.

“Don’t dive!” she howled and clenched her palms on her father’s shoulder. “No, no, don’t dive, don’t jump, do whatever, but don’t jump in here!” she kept yowling.

“Hania, calm down. How will I get there otherwise? It is too high and too steep to walk,” Janusz grabbed his daughter by the shoulders and tried but failed to push her aside—Hanka was putting up a fierce resistance. “Don’t jump into water you don’t know!” It was forbidden. She’d been told many times not to do it and she could still remember the litany of possible disasters: spinal injury, paralysis, cuts. She held her father and screamed.

“Hanka!” Now Janusz got genuinely angry. “Stop it!” his tone brought the girl around a bit. “I am diving!” he declared, then sat Hanka on the grass and walked to the edge.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kata Mlek is an award-winning, genre-crossing author publishing in English and Polish. In Polish, she has published three novels and a book of short stories, with her fourth novel, *9th of July*, coming in 2016.

*Absolute Sunset* is Kata's first book to be published in English, with her remaining books to follow in 2015 and 2016.

Visit Kata at [www.KataMlek.com](http://www.KataMlek.com) and keep up with her latest news and musings on her blog at [www.KataMlek.com/blog](http://www.KataMlek.com/blog).

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