

Absolute Sunset Companion Story

Now And Then

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Now/then. Two extremes. Young/old. New/used. Light/dark. Spiral/straight. Simple/complex.
Two extremes. Zero and one. To have or have not. Freedom/cage.

That's how she sees the world, in two extremes, side by side. Her name is Sabina and she can't stop making comparisons. Two extremes, two different faces. Where do they come from, these drastic changes between one thing and another? It must be Bebok's fault. It's always his fault when things are the wrong way, like clothes turned inside out to be washed. Bebok, the Silesian demon who takes things that don't belong to him and leaves poor substitutes instead. Takes good children and leaves nasty foundlings. Takes sweet, fresh milk and leaves some that's foul and sour. Takes good wives and leaves terrible harridans in their place. He's greedy. He steals everything he can carry—the entire region of Silesia—and as a result, Sabina can't fit in anymore. She can't make sense of this new reality. She has neither the energy nor the desire to step into this new world, for which she never asked. *I prefer it the way it was before, thank you.*

It wasn't always this way. When Sabina was a kid, the world was the way it was supposed to be. Everything had its place, every event had its moment. Father went to the mine in the morning. Mother dusted, using a rag made from old pyjamas because it held the French polish well. She took good care of the furniture—they had to wait a long time for it, lining up for days, being checked by the lineup committee. If the committee found that you'd left the line, even for a while, you'd miss your turn. It was the time of empty butcher shops, where you'd find nothing but a lone bottle of vinegar on the shelves—the economy of scarcity in communist Poland. Sabina slept in homemade bedclothes covered in little bears. She couldn't stay for after-school clubs, because her mother was unemployed. Which was nice in its way—she could sleep all she wanted, as long as her mother didn't need help with something.

Usually Sabina didn't actually sleep, though. She just napped, listening to whatever was going on in the apartment. The tap of the gas heater. The whistling of the kettle. A sound of cutting, or the scraping of chair as her mother had breakfast, then smoked her one cigarette of the day. Sabina learned to love the smell of tobacco—it's why she smokes, now that she's an adult.

She'd get up, lured by the smell.

“Good morning.”

“Good morning.”

“Did you sleep well?”

“Yes.”

The kitchen floor was slick, like a body of a snail. The curtains did battle with the wind—it was always windy in *Tysiąclecie*, their apartment complex. When the air squeezed between the apartment blocks, it sped up, running like a madman and pushing people around. In winter, they actually fell, it was so slippery. Sabina should have felt bad for them, but she'd laugh. There were so many people walking, they moved one after another, like ants in a column. Each block had a dozen or more storeys, and a dozen or so apartments on each floor. Identical cubicles into which the architects put thousands of people, like a honeycomb or a scaled up termite mound inhabited by people. And everyone was helpless in the face of the wind, as helpless as an insect on which some person might blow. It was funny! If Sabina could have explained it this way, everyone else would have laughed too, but she had trouble expressing her thoughts clearly. She'd get confused, and then angry, and then still more confused.

She went to school with her hair in a neat braid or pigtail. Her mother styled it very carefully each morning—Sabina would scream if the comb pulled her hair. It happened only once, on a morning when her mother wasn't home. She hadn't come back from the health centre, and Sabina's father had to do her hair, and it hurt. Sabina started to cry, so he took her to a neighbour who lived upstairs.

“Do her hair,” he said bluntly. “I can't do it. Why does she cry and scream the whole time?”

It was unusual for dad to be nervous back then. He was normally very patient and lenient—her mother was the “bad” parent. He was good and spoiled her, hugged and kissed her. Mother was the guard, the watchdog, the supervisor, demanding perfect calligraphy and clean socks. They fought over Sabina, and Sabina laughed—it was almost as much fun as watching people falling on the ice.

And it's not true that Sabina screamed a lot—not true at all. Now she shouts a lot, now that she's old and has lost patience with not being the center of attention. She has to raise her voice just to be heard, as if the listener were far away. But in the past, things were different. She didn't shout—she spoke. A lot. Sometimes a little louder than usual, especially when

people didn't believe her. She'd say she'd seen something, dreamed of something, but people didn't believe her when she talked about the thing that flapped about, the thing with black eyes, the thing as black as the coal that came out of her father's mine. Everyone treated it as a joke and played it down, until Sabina finally did too.

"Don't tell stories."

"Don't be silly."

"If you don't have anything useful to say, keep quiet."

"Please, just stop."

Things that haven't been named don't really exist, so she tried not to dwell on her dreams. There were much more important things to worry about. She had to fight off the feeling that she'd seen something scary and unavoidable, something cruel that was banished by the sunlight the moment she awoke. It disappeared the way that a picture of Sabina, standing on a chair at the Christmas tree and singing carols, had disappeared from an old photo album. An uncle from Germany had taken it. Now only a ghostly outline was visible. Sabina had worn angel wings and a white dress, a gift from one of her aunts in Germany. They had sent a lot of gifts: clothes, medicine, toys, and sweets. Things you couldn't buy in Poland in the sixties. Her mother had drawn the curtains and Sabina had eaten the chocolates in secret, because seeing her would have upset the other kids, who didn't have relatives abroad who sent them things. It was better not to show off since they didn't have enough to share—that was what mother said. Sabina had drunk the Coca Cola they'd been sent, and its magical taste had made her feel a lot better, helping her to forget her night terrors.

Mother tried to hide the fact they were doing better than others, with access to the miners' shops and a family in Germany. German relatives weren't such an exceptional thing—in Silesia a lot of families had relatives there, and the local dialect even resembled German a little—but in those dark, communist times it was better not to stand out. Everyone was supposed to be the same, after all. So Sabina would put on her German clothes, and over them she would put her blue school uniform, the same one everyone wore. That way no one could see that she had a better outfit. Although the shoes were a problem. They couldn't be hidden, and they were noticeable. All the other girls had plastic slippers, while Sabina had sneakers. Despite her mother's efforts, despite eating chocolate behind drawn curtains, she still attracted attention. Sabina didn't care, though. Why should she?

She was also unusually pretty. Even wearing a baggy dress, she still drew stares. Even if she dressed exactly the same as all her school friends, she was still noticed. The bright red hair, the freckles, and those striking eyes. She was different from those around her in every way. You'd think that her peers would reject her, but they didn't—they lavished attention on her, watching her the way they would an exotic fish in an aquarium. It was nice. And it was useful, too, helping her to get straight A's in school. But it was also tiring. All those watching eyes—the constant, intent observation. And her mother's endless scrutiny on top of it all.

“Don't shame me,” she'd say. “Wash your face, cut your nails. I'm going to redo your hair. Stand up straight, sit straight, and don't speak first.”

Sabina was proof of her mother's worth. In Silesia, an exemplary kid was a sign of a good housewife—everybody knew that. Along with how clean your home was, of course. And the kids had to be scrubbed clean, too. Sabina had to meet her mother's demands if she wanted any peace, so she avoided the sandbox so as not to ruin her skirt. She refused to ride a bike in order not to tear her socks. She sometimes played a popular Polish game, similar to jump rope, but with a rubber band, an occasionally swung on one of the swings. But one time there was a nail on the seat that tore her underwear, and her mother was furious. The shame!

Walks with her father were a relief from this constant control. At those times, Sabina was allowed to do what she wanted. Her mother would give her the same old clothes: trousers with patches and a penguin T-shirt that wasn't really big enough for a growing girl—and smaller every year. Sabina didn't care. They drove their sketchy old Trabant out to the woods or the lake. Sun scalded the red hood of the car, and when Sabina closed her eyes she saw lighting flashes—bright red spots, like blood but not scary. Not like the blood she'd seen in her dreams. They rushed headlong, driving up hills and then coming down so quickly that Sabina felt a tickling in her stomach, heard a hissing in her ears. Sometimes she opened the window and stuck her head out to make the hiss louder. She had wild strawberries in the wood. Unwashed. She climbed every single tree. She teased geese in the meadow. Jumped over cow dung. She would come back to Katowice in the evening, filthy, and rush up their staircase so that nobody would have a chance to see her tangled hair and the green pieces of sorrel between her teeth. *Shame on you, Sabina!*

“You’re such a pretty girl, but you don’t know how to groom!” her mother would say. Her father would just laugh and stroke Sabina’s hair.

She *did* groom, of course. She always tried to live up to expectations, but she simply couldn’t. Especially when she went to secondary school and didn’t do well, bringing shame on her mother once again. Maths, physics, and chemistry—she just didn’t get it, and rolling her short skirts up to make them even shorter didn’t help. Her parents had to meet with the principal—once, and then again. They tried to arrange things so that Sabina could somehow go to college, saying that she was trying, that she was working hard, that this was just temporary.

“She’s been tired,” Sabina’s mother said. “She’s been having nightmares and trouble sleeping. In fact, she’s barely been sleeping at all. It’s adolescence—you know how that is.”

“I don’t think so,” the headmaster said. “Sabina will do much better in vocational school. Maybe hairdresser training? Her hair is always very neatly styled. I can tell she takes an interest in it, and she has some talent.” Sabina’s mother didn’t let on that she still did her daughter’s hair, even though Sabina was fifteen by then.

The funny thing is, Sabina did turn out to have some talent as a stylist. The teachers appreciated how hard she worked and the patience with which she would comb out the hundreds of practice heads with plastic hair. They nodded. *Yes, you’re not bad, but you have to practice, practice, practice. A pretty face won’t help you if you don’t know how to do a perm.* So Sabina practiced all day long without complaint, surprising even herself with her persistence.

Everything would have been perfect, if not for the fact that her beauty, which had once worked wonders, started to cause trouble. “You’re so pretty.” “Great legs.” “What a rear.” How long can you listen to that? It’s nice at first, but hear it long enough and it starts to turn your stomach. And nobody listens to pretty girls. When Sabina talked about her feelings, about her intuition, people laughed—her schoolmates, as well the boys from the nearby mechanics’ school. They thought she was joking. Prophecies and predictions? What a load! Sabina’s just trying to get attention.

“You dream about bullshit because you drink too much,” they said. They didn’t understand that she drank because, when she did, she didn’t see unusual things, didn’t feel, was calm. It was a relief to be calm.

So she drank a fair bit back then, but not as much as she does now. Now/then—two extremes. These days she drinks a lot more, but it’s harder to get drunk. When she was younger, half a glass of shine was enough. You couldn’t buy alcohol in the shops, so you had to make it at home using plums, or cherries, or apples, plus sugar and yeast. “Moonshine” people called it, since it was produced at night, illegally. She would get a premonition that something bad was going to happen, so she’d drink, and it would dull her feelings, anaesthetize her a little, drown out the world.

She was an adult, free to do whatever she wanted. She disappeared from home for nights at a time, despite her parents’ pleas that she stay home, not go out partying all the time—it was shameful! Sabina’s father somehow put up with her lifestyle, but her mother refused to. Sabina ignored her. She plunged into parties and discos. If something was going on, she had to be part of it. Hanging around her neighborhood was boring—she needed to cast a wider net than that. She met new people, and they liked her—and they liked her drinking. She spent most night drinking at somebody’s else’s expense. Perfect!

One night she and some friends had a bonfire. They were going to bake potatoes. Nothing scary, nothing sketchy. All you had to do was stay away from the woods, since you might get lost in the dark—any kid knows that. And stay away from the bushes because of the mosquitoes. They kindled the fire and her friends put the potatoes in, then waited. Sabina didn’t bother—baking took too much time. She simply sat by the fire and smoked, feeling warm and good.

They had some moonshine, which made her feel ever warmer. Everyone was drinking. “It’s cold,” they said, “drink up Sabina, autumn’s blowing at your back.” The air was cool and wet, and she pulled her dress down to cover her calves. She pulled her hands into her sleeves—the bonfire wasn’t enough to warm them. Sabina always got cold easily. So she drank more and immediately felt better.

“Let’s warm you up even more,” her friends said. There were three of them. “Don’t worry, Sabina, you’re going to feel so hot!”

And then everything went wrong. Even now, Sabina can’t really understand why. She had two more shots of shine, but her friends drank more. They started to slur. “You’re so hot. I want to fuck you. Sabina, I bet you’re good, right? Show us what you’ve got under that sweater.” They ordered her to show them her tits, and she couldn’t refuse—that is, she refused, but they ignore her. They took her sweater off, tore her dress off. She wasn’t wearing a bra. She tried to cover her body, but they grabbed her by her arms. They were strong, there was no point resisting.

“I don’t want to!” Sabina said, but they weren’t listening. “Don’t touch me—no!” Nobody listens to cute girls. They undressed her and pushed her down on the grass, a prickly stubble. And then they took what they wanted, one by one. Hard. She didn’t try to push them away—it would have been pointless.

“Drink some more,” they said when they’d finished. Then they took the potatoes out of the fire and ate. Sabina had more moonshine and passed out.

She woke up alone, in a ditch, lying on her back, looking up at a dark grey sky. She had no clue where she was or how she’d gotten there. She sighed. She could smell the odors of ash and semen. She didn’t have the strength or coordination to get up, so she let herself slip back into unconsciousness. Then somebody helped her stand up, took her with him to his house. A stranger. He said he couldn’t leave her like that and promised to call her parents.

And he did. They came immediately, and Sabina thought they’d be happy and relieved to find her. That they would hug her and listen to her. Something bad had happened!

“They, they, did, did,” she said, not quite able to put a sentence together.

Her parents didn’t let her speak. They put her in the car and took her home. Her father beat her with a cable, so furious that he couldn’t get control of his temper. Sabina saw him this angry, this cruel, only this one time in her life. He hit her, hard, on her naked body. Her mother said nothing, just watched. And nodded. It was necessary.

After that, she had to drink more in order to forget. And more. And still more. Drinking jammed the screaming in her head, erased the smells of that night, and strangled the thing inside her that demanded attention, that howled for the three men to be punished, that was quiet only when it was drunk. And as a bonus, not only did it shut up, but Sabina was more relaxed. So relaxed, that she'd have sex with literally any man at all and not care. Moonshine and cheap wine were the best anaesthetics. She quit the school, and probably would have become a prostitute if not for her father. He was overwhelmed by remorse after beating her. He wanted to—no, *had* to—do something to pull Sabina back from the brink. Every parent labors under the delusion that they can save their child. Sabina thought it was hilarious.

“You need a husband,” Andrzej said. “Someone decent. I’ll see to it.”

Sabina snorted.

“Right, right,” she said, not really paying attention.

She thought her father was just talking, so she was surprised when a few weeks later he said that they would be having a guest for dinner that Wednesday. He looked suggestively at Sabina. She shrugged, but she helped her mother in the kitchen anyway. To this day she’s not sure why—she could have gone out and had some wine, but she didn’t.

So that Wednesday she met Janusz, an accounting clerk who worked with her father. Andrzej would prefer someone who worked underground, but there were no candidates there. Everyone at the mine knew that Sabina was a handful. How could Andrzej have talked even Janusz into coming? Sabina first thought that he must have offered him some kind of financial support and a flat—like a dowry. Otherwise Janusz would never have married her, beautiful or not. Later, once she got to know Janusz and realized that he didn’t care much about money, she decided that it couldn’t have been a dowry. Although she hates Janusz now, she has to admit that you can’t buy him—it just wouldn’t work. It had to have been blackmail, then. He must have been forced into it, with the whole thing sugar-coated by her beauty. She *had* been beautiful once. Today, no. Then/today. Today/then.

In the beginning, Sabina didn't care for Janusz at all, but she eventually came to kind of like him. He was patient, and he spoke quietly and not too often, so she finally got a chance to speak. And even when she sometimes rambled on about things everyone else said were nonsense, he never laughed at her. That was Janusz: loving, understanding, truthful, careful. Then. Now he doesn't love her anymore. Does she love him? No—that's all over. But she did. She loved him inexpertly, even incompetently, but she did love him. During that short interval, when each of them loved the other, she felt good with him—and good about herself. She no longer had nightmares. They had fled, afraid of love, she guessed. Love is powerful, but hard to find. Too bad.

They got married and moved into her parents place. He was an orphan, which she liked—no mother-in-law or Sunday dinners. She got pregnant. She was sure everything would go smoothly and easily. Normally. Home, dinner, cleaning. Dusting with French polish and peeling potatoes. She would forget all the bad things from her past and start from scratch. Again. No drinking to quiet her fears, to hush the voices in her head. And the thing that talked to her would disappear. Everything would be fine.

And it was, for a little while. Sabina was stable, she didn't shake all the time. Even when her mother died, she didn't lose her composure. In fact, she thought it was very nice of her mother—they had never liked each other. It went just right. A funeral and a wake, as it should be.

And then it came back. Like a disease sometimes does—malaria, for instance—returning for no apparent reason. And now it was even more powerful. When she was pregnant with Hanka, she barely slept. She had one nightmare after another. Nightmares of the worst kind, although she couldn't remember them once she awoke. There was a single snapshot that she could recall: a black and burned human silhouette, holding onto a fence, as if the person had been trying to run away from some inferno but hadn't managed to get over in time. No other details, just the one image. And the emotions—the pain and the fear and the panic. She'd woken up screaming, feeling the agony of the dream. She drank from time to time, using vodka to help her get through. But the dreams didn't leave, haunting her again and again.

“Don't let him, don't let him!” something shouted inside her head, but she had no idea who it was talking about.

By the time she finally got it, it was too late to do anything. It was an ordinary day. Her father and Janusz went to work. It was a hot and stuffy June, and there would be a storm in the afternoon. Sabina was alone in the house. When they left and closed the door, it was suddenly so quiet, it seemed as if the world had disappeared, or like Sabina had slipped under the surface of a pool of still water. It was so strange, that she sat down where she was, right on the floor, feeling as if something had tripped her. Something half visible, almost inaudible. She sensed that something was in the flat. She crawled around, trying to find it, even calling for it, but it didn't answer. It just scratched at the walls and laughed.

She lay down on the sofa to wait for Janusz. He came back at the usual time, made her some tea, and calmed her down. She turned on the radio. She didn't really listen to it, but she wanted the sound—normal conversation instead of crazy laughter. If she had paid attention, she would have heard the news sooner. Maybe she could even have done something. But she didn't, just smiled and heated up dinner. And at just the moment that she was ready to serve, the doorbell rang, with its stupid, familiar sound, surprising Sabina and making her drop the plate she was holding. It hit the floor, potatoes and beets splattering everywhere. Shards and cutlery rattled.

“No!” said Sabina without knowing who she was talking to. Herself? The plate? The bell?

She went to the hall and opened the door. Her father's workmates were on the stoop.

“Sabina,” they said.

“Yes?”

“It's about your dad...”

“Yes.”

Why did they tell her everything in such detail? Why? Couldn't they just say that he was gone? That he went west? Couldn't they use some stupid idiom instead of telling her the whole story?

There had been a storm over Czechowice, not far from Katowice, right by the oil refinery. Nothing special about it, just a small storm, two or three flashes of lightning. But the last of

them had hit one of the chimneys. The oil in the container below it, almost nine thousand litres, had caught fire.

“As you know, there are more containers there” explained Andrzej’s friends. They were firemen at the mine, like him.

The fire equipment wasn’t working for some stupid reason, so Czechowice had called fire units from all over the region. Andrzej’s unit had gone, together with some army troops and several squads that specialised in dealing with chemicals. All of them knew what to do, but even so it was hard going. Everything seemed to work against them, to go wrong. It’s always that way with disasters—a dozen or so minor facts, little problems, join together, in a single place one time, and create something devastating. Human fate works the same way. Small stones that life puts into our backpacks, at some point become too heavy for us to carry on. Sabina can’t find the words to say this, but she knows it’s the truth. The bitter, rancid truth. She can’t get used to that taste.

The oil in the container had caught fire, and they’d tried hard to extinguish it. It flowed all over the place, but the firemen isolated the lake of flame with foam and started to pump the oil from a neighbouring container to ones further away from the heat. The fire was howling, but it was under control.

In the middle of this mayhem, nobody noticed that water had found its way into the burning container. It sank below the oil and started to boil. You could hear it, the gurgle. The firemen stopped to listen.

“What is that?”

The water boiled, louder and louder, still beneath the oil.

“What is it?”

At one a.m., the water reached a temperature where the container couldn’t hold it any longer. The steam lifted the burning oil and the container exploded. Burning oil, carried by superheated steam, gushed two hundred meters into the air, covering everything in the area. It

got through the banked sand and flowed along the internal roads, destroying everything in its path. Fire was falling from the sky, like in pictures of the apocalypse. Red, red everywhere. People ran in panic. The fire attacked them, the trees, the buildings, the cars. It screamed and roared. It was hungry.

“Run, run!” the firemen called.

They ran as fast as they could. Andrzej too. He had a fire-resistant uniform on—those who didn’t turn into human torches immediately, screaming so loudly that their voices actually hurt you. But he the lucky! Almost. There was a fence in his way, and he had difficulty climbing it in the heat and madness. A few seconds later, another container exploded, spraying oil on everyone. At a thousand degrees Celsius.

“Just his uniform is left. Everything organic disintegrates at that temperature.”

Organic? That was my father! Sabina couldn’t find a way to interrupt them, though. To tell them to shut up. She couldn’t speak, cry, scream. She’d been struck dumb.

The fire lasted for six more days, she heard on the radio. Squads from as far away as Czechoslovakia and Germany came to help. They removed the bodies of the fallen, then prepared for a final assault on the burning refinery. Edward Gierek and general Jaruzelski arrived at the scene. The containers were eventually extinguished, but they smouldered for a long time afterward. Sabina was numb. Even when she saw a photo of her father’s silver uniform, now black and burnt, in the newspaper. He’d been holding the fence. She knew it was him. She simply knew it.

From that moment, everything seems to simply pass Sabina by. She didn’t notice the passage of time. She could see, but she couldn’t understand. She could see, but she didn’t care, even though important things were happening—important to her and to the world. Hanka’s birth and the collapse of the communist regime. Wałęsa, the shipyard in Gdynia. Martial law and the first elections. Poland was changing. The *tysiąclecie* complex got “pastelosis,” as people called it, meaning that some of the buildings were freshened up, painted with multicolored waves. There was a new market. And a new supermarket. New buses and trams. New roads and meat in the shops.

But while things changed on the outside, the essence of Silesia was the same—it's a state of mind, unaffected by details on the surface. Beneath all the new decorations, billboards, and posters, it hadn't changed. The past and the future merged. Right now and back then, everyone watched Sabina. They followed her, but nobody could help her as she sat by the window with a cigarette. She would have liked to call to them, but she couldn't. She'd have liked to die, but she couldn't do that either. Now she's in a state of anabiosis—suspended animation, somewhere between sleep and waking, trying to hold on. Trying not to think, not to miss her mother, her father, communism. The good old days when she still understood the world. Today's reality is a mystery, an unsolvable puzzle. The only advantage of the present is that there are TV shows—they keep Sabina entertained for long hours.

She sits in front of the television or at the window. She doesn't care. Is she calm? No, she's asleep.

She reacts only once, when Hanka comes to her to say that she had a dream about a bird.

“He was black and he said that you're going to die,” Hanka whispers. “That you're going to hang yourself.”

It's the first time Sabina feels anything in a very long time, and what she feels is anger. She hits Hanka as hard as she can. And feels good about it.

“Don't you ever, ever say that!” she says. She knows somehow that she's doing the right thing, and that hasn't happened for a long, long time. “Don't you ever talk about it!” Sabina doesn't know why, but she *must* forbid Hanka from talking about the bird. She *has* to.

Hanka doesn't understand. She cries and runs to her room. Silence. Sabina can go back to her usual spot and habitual state.

If you don't want to careen between extremes, you have to stay in one place, not move too much. Like Sabina. That's the way to you survive, and Sabina's making use of it. That and vodka. No more moonshine. Good, Polish vodka. There is no now and no then, because the

days all merge together. They pass and pass, and one day the last one will pass, and Sabina will finally disappear. Just like that. She will turn to ash.