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Extracts from *Reisefieber* by Mikołaj Łoziński**Part III, Chapter 1**

Astrid hadn't time to take a good look at the restaurant – it was the first time she had been there. “And sure to be the last,” she thought, even though she quite liked the look of the interior. It was clean, but not sterile, and the wooden tables and chairs looked comfortable. Late as ever, she was looking around for two things: a mirror, and Spencer's table. She wanted to see herself once more before he saw her. Unfortunately, the only mirror in the restaurant was hanging by the corner table, just above Spencer's head. She glanced at her watch, and after a second's hesitation, went into the ladies. She touched up her eye make-up, let down her hair, ran a comb through it and decided not to tie it back.

“It's the last time I'll be late,” she said, as Spencer stood up and kissed her on the cheeks.

“You always say that,” he replied, the corners of his eyes smiling.

Astrid noticed that he was dressed a bit differently from usual when they met. He was wearing a light blue shirt and brown corduroy trousers. The two colours didn't go together, and Astrid thought Caroline must have gone to visit her sister in the country again.

The restaurant was full. She could smell smoke in the air. She was waiting for Spencer's questions – why hadn't she answered his calls and letters, why hadn't she given any sign of life? She must tell him!

But Spencer sat opposite her, saying nothing, and smiling.

She took a packet of cigarettes from her handbag and put it on the table. She realised she had forgotten to paint her fingernails. They were long, maybe even a bit too long. For a moment she thought of Daniel. She asked the waiter for some matches and lit a cigarette.

“Astrid...”

“It doesn't make any difference to me now,” she said, inhaling.

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“Don’t talk like that. Please,” said Spencer after a while.

That day she had been thinking about the people nearest to her, trying as ever to analyse her relationships with them, to find some non-existent, impossible formula for an equation which she could reduce these relationships to, or maybe even find some common denominator for them. It occurred to her that the equation was the 64 years of her life full of all the pluses, minuses, inequalities, deletions and question marks that she filled it with at every spare moment, every day.

Anyway, why should anyone need an equation that can’t be solved?

“From the mathematical point of view it’s a hopeless case,” she thought, and glanced affectionately at Spencer, who was so worried about her health.

A young, smartly dressed boy took their order. On his recommendation Astrid chose the steamed zander, and took a close look at the boy in his white shirt. She thought being a waiter must be a difficult job. People are convinced the waiter serves the guests because he likes waiting on them, because it’s the natural thing for him, he simply has it in his blood – that’s the way he was born, and that’s how he’ll die. But if he doesn’t do it, or does it badly, that means he’s a bad waiter and isn’t suited to the profession. “It’s as if they think you only become a waiter because of a vocation.”

Their aperitifs were served. Astrid started nervously looking around the room, because Spencer still hadn’t asked her a single question, and she could feel herself gradually losing courage. At first sight, the customers at the tables next to theirs were doing exactly what she might have expected of them. They seemed to have mastered the role of restaurant clients to perfection: they were eating, drinking, debating, keeping quiet, turning the lock in the toilet door, catching the waiter’s attention with their eyes (to reel him in to the table with the aid of an invisible line) and discreetly looking around them, as if wanting to assure themselves that everything about them was all right and that they fitted in with the place – while at the same time being ready at any moment to take to task anyone who didn’t know or had forgotten where he was that Saturday evening. “What nonsense! What’s happening to me?” she thought.

“Caroline asked me to send you her greetings,” said Spencer.

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“Thank you. We haven’t seen each other for ages.”

“We haven’t seen each other for ages either.”

“Yes,” said Astrid, realising the right moment had come.

“You know we celebrated our anniversary – it’s fifty years since our wedding.

Unbelievable how time flies, isn’t it? Did you get our invitation to the party?” Spencer began, and Astrid had to lean towards him, because as always when he was talking to her about his marriage he spoke very quietly. And almost every time Astrid thought it was funny. She hadn’t forgotten the booming voice he used to deliver his modern history lectures. At the time she had even suspected it was because of a problem with his hearing.

Spencer fell completely silent as soon as the waiter came and set two plates of fish before them.

“Bon appetit,” he said, and Astrid smiled at him sympathetically, because she herself had once worked as a waitress.

They swapped a few comments about the fish, as if they’d agreed to put off the more serious conversations until later. Astrid ate slowly, laying the bones on the edge of her plate. Spencer had already finished and was looking at her. At the beginning of their friendship he used to compliment her by saying: “How elegantly you eat”, and at the time Astrid always thought it a rather unusual compliment and wasn’t quite sure how she should respond to it. To be on the safe side she chose not to say anything – after all, in this situation every time she opened her mouth she might induce him to change his mind. Anyway, it didn’t matter, because now she had other problems.

“The party was a great success. We were just sorry you weren’t there. Lots of people asked after you.”

She laid her cutlery on the plate slowly, as if she wasn’t sure if the knife should be on the left or the right, and the fork pointing up or down.

Her relationship with Spencer was out of the ordinary, like just about everything in Astrid’s life. It had started when she was least expecting it.

“I couldn’t come. I was worn out after the tests.”

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At first Astrid hadn't been sure if she was in love. Even today if someone had asked her what exactly she felt for Spencer, she might not have been able to answer unambiguously. At the time she was very lonely. She had stopped working as soon as her menopause began. Out of habit she went on getting up early in the morning, had some coffee and listened to the radio, but usually only in order to go back to bed after a while. She was bothered by the thought that she was growing old and ceasing to be a woman, and was capable of spending days on end without leaving the house. She took down the mirror that had always hung in the living room and put it away in a cupboard. She was sure she'd never have another relationship with anyone.

Daniel still used to come to Paris then, but he wasn't living at her place any more. He had a well-paid job with a newspaper. He lived an independent, separate life, and she felt he no longer needed her – it was she that needed him more than he did her. But why did he refuse to see that? He never stopped criticising her, and Astrid felt a pain in her stomach whenever she looked at herself through her son's eyes. Then she would see that whatever she did, she did it badly. Daniel bore a grudge against her for bringing him up badly, allowing him not to go to school when he didn't feel like it, and pretending not to notice (as she had innocently admitted years later) whenever he faked an illness by warming up the thermometer by some method that she never discovered to 41 degrees, in other words, as she did realise, to a state of clinical death.

Daniel was so close to her that every criticism on his part ended for her in a day in bed or a visit to her psychotherapist ("who doesn't help you in the slightest"), who would repeat that the world had not yet produced any children who had no grudges against their parents (sometimes Astrid thought perhaps that was why Aude lived with no one but her husband). It wasn't very comforting, and she felt she couldn't go on like that – hence the studies. That was when quite unexpectedly she crossed paths with Spencer.

"So how's Caroline?" she asked.

"She's fine. She's a little tired and upset, complaining of a pain in her hands, but she looks great. She's decided to go and rest at her sister's for a couple of days. I was supposed to go with her, but you called."

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“I wanted to see you to tell you something.”

“I’m all ears.”

“I haven’t the strength any more.”

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Part IV, Chapter 10

Daniel kept putting off his call to Spencer. After all, he had quarrelled with him too. It had all begun with him. He had no desire to call today. He imagined dialling the number, and hearing his own artificial voice saying: “Hello, it’s me, Daniel. It’s a long time since we’ve spoken,” or else, even worse: “Hello, Daniel here. What do you mean who?! Son of Astrid, your husband’s lover – hasn’t Spencer told you about me?”

“I’ve been longing to meet you for ages! Of course my husband has mentioned you – he often does. It’s wonderful to hear from you! We’ve never met, but we do think the same thing.”

“Meaning what?”

“You and I have quite independently opposed this relationship. You’re the only one who thought about me. I appreciate that very much, my dear.”

He picked up the phone. He dialled the number of the flat where he had lived throughout his childhood and even a bit longer. The young voice with a foreign accent already knew. He knew who Daniel was, he knew who the new owner of his flat was. The only thing he didn’t know was whether the rent would go on being the same. Daniel didn’t know either. They would talk about it when they met – so he decided.

Next day he stopped to look at the bus stop Louise had told him about. It was no longer the same stop he had waited at yesterday at the age of seven. It was modern, glazed, with an electronic board counting out the minutes until the buses arrived. Daniel realised he would never remember what sort of flower he’d been holding that day. He automatically looked at his watch. There were still fifteen minutes to go before his meeting.

The bus stopped in front of him. No one got off. The driver caught Daniel’s eye, saw him shake his head, shut the door and drove off.

Astrid’s flat might have changed too, just like the bus stop. Strange that he’d never thought of that before.

More and more often he kept looking at his watch.

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He had heard on the radio that in the course of his life the average person spends a total of two weeks waiting for the lights to change from red to green. A couple of months ago Anna had decided to give away the television. She reckoned it was distracting Daniel from his writing. So he had started listening to the radio.

He crossed the street. He went into a dark gateway and didn't trip on the high step, which he remembered well from childhood. He pressed bell number five. As he was going up the stairs to the second floor, he noticed the familiar sweet, damp smell of the staircase, the one Astrid used to complain about.

In the door stood a boy of his height with brown eyes and curly hair. They shook hands and Daniel asked him to say his name again. He tried to pronounce it, but without success.

"What country are you from?" he asked, passing his hand over a chest of drawers, furniture that Astrid had brought as a memento from Sweden.

"Poland."

"Poland," he repeated meaninglessly and, rubbing the dust into his trouser leg, went down the dark corridor into the bright living room.

The red armchair was in its old place. On his table, covered with a colourful tablecloth, lay some books and a stack of newspapers. As a first reaction he even wanted to put them to one side or ask the boy to tidy them up. Instead, he started walking about the flat, opening each door in turn, as if he imagined she must be somewhere there, that after all it was their flat, their chest of drawers, armchair and bathroom and that she couldn't just have left it all like that.

He went into the small bedroom and sat down on Astrid's bed. It creaked as it always did whenever he sat on it. He remembered her telling him he wasn't allowed to jump on it. He could see her standing over him, her gestures and expressions. "Hear it creaking? You'll end up ruining the springs!"

He got up to open Astrid's wardrobe. He used to sit inside it in the dark, squeezed in between the coats, while Astrid would be looking for him all over the flat – as he was now looking for her.

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The shelves were full of clothes, but they smelled completely different from in the past. He realised the smell of the flat was no longer the same either. He looked around. The boy with the unpronounceable name was right beside him. Daniel didn't know if he'd been standing there the whole time, or if he'd only just come in.

In any case he closed the wardrobe and went back into the room with two windows.

He thought the old smell was no longer anywhere except in his memory. Because there's no such thing as a flat's memory, is there?

"Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Yes, please." Daniel sat down in the red armchair.

He looked about the room. He gazed at the white walls that hadn't been painted since long ago, and at the ceiling, every last tiny fissure of which was now his property. He was still trying to remember Astrid's voice.

He got up and went across to the kitchen, which also smelled different. The boy put two brown mugs on the counter top and waited with them until the water had boiled in the electric kettle. Last time he had been here, Astrid was standing in the same spot, also saying nothing. She hadn't replied to his questions and grievances. And as if wanting to provoke him even more, she had started doing the washing up, slowly soaking the sponge and checking the water temperature. Daniel had torn a wet plate from her hand and thrown it to the floor. "I'm not going to clean that up" – those were the last words he had heard his mother say.

"Very quiet flat, isn't it?" He realised it was up to him to start the conversation.

"Very," replied the boy, and once again the flat fell as silent as before.

Her name only came up after a half-hour, detailed and boring conversation about permanently leaking taps, old door locks and a new rental price. Occasionally Daniel stopped listening and looked at his watch. It occurred to him that things like repairs, paying bills and filling in complicated tax forms take up far more space in real life than they do in books or films.

But from what the boy said, Daniel realised that wasn't true of Astrid. She didn't know how to sign a flat rental contract, and had forgotten to bring along her bank account number. However, she was most concerned that they should look after the plants – he pointed

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towards them – and water them every day. She didn't want to take them with her – she said they'd have too little light in her new flat. Now and then she used to come by. She said she wanted to see how they were, and whether they were looking after them well.

“And did you look after them?”

“Of course. We had no choice.”

Daniel wanted to say it would have been even better if they'd looked after the walls. But he was just drinking the last drop of bitter, awful tasting tea. He put down the mug on a corner of the table covered in newspapers. Only now did it occur to him that he could have asked for some sugar.

“Did you only talk about plants?” he asked finally.

Daniel examined him closely. He had a timid smile, uneven gaps between his teeth and brown eyes that looked away every time he caught his gaze.

“Not only. We talked about everything.”

“Everything?”

“About us. About her. She told us a lot about herself.”

“She told us a lot about herself” – the boy's mouth closed, waiting for the next question, while Daniel seemed to go on hearing that sentence in the silence of the flat.

“Were you on first-name terms?” he asked, knowing that must have been the case.

The boy hesitated for a moment, as if he wasn't sure it was appropriate to be on first-name terms with someone who's no longer alive. Then he nodded, and Daniel tried to imagine Astrid pronouncing his unpronounceable name.

“She suggested it to us at the very start. I think it was the day she brought the phone. She swapped phones with us – she took our old one and gave us a new, wireless one. She said was too modern. She'd lost the instructions – she'd thrown them in the bin, in fact. She said young people should have new phones, and old people old ones. And that the word is already designed that way. She didn't say it all that seriously, you know?”

Daniel thought again of the thousands of phone books where somewhere under the letter “R” she could still be found. Four simple sentences recorded on the old answer machine to say goodbye to all those still wanting to hear her voice. (“This is Astrid Reis. I'm not at

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home right now. Leave a message. I'll return your call as soon as I get back.") What Aude hadn't wanted to tell him. A letter. A few memories of his own. A few memories of other people's. What the boy with the unpronounceable name remembered. All these traces she had left behind in so many different places. Like the marks left by a rubber.

"The last time she came to see us was two months ago," the boy said, breaking the silence. "She liked our tablecloth. She asked where she could buy one like it."

"And?"

"I joked that she could get one here, and she laughed. In fact, my girlfriend brought it from Poland."

"And then?"

"Nothing – that was our last conversation."

"Didn't she say she was ill?"

"No."

"But you knew she was in hospital later on?"

"Yes. Mr Spencer called and said she had fallen off a ladder. She'd been badly bruised and was in hospital. Then two weeks after his call a woman phoned, a friend of Astrid's. She had a very sad voice and told us Astrid had died." He said all this slowly, with a strong accent, without looking Daniel in the eye.

"She had fallen off a ladder" – Daniel thought this lie was just like Astrid. He wondered if the boy really believed it. But it didn't matter either way.

Daniel took another look at the tablecloth. It was just as colourful as a while ago, as it had been two months ago. He didn't like it.

"Can you still buy these?" He was surprised by his own question.

"Those tablecloths?"

"Yes. I'd like to have something Astrid liked."

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Part VII, Chapter 3

He was no longer living with Astrid then, but he had the keys to her flat in his pocket, along with his own. He dropped in after work, unexpectedly, without calling in advance. Anyway, he almost always did that – it wasn't really much of a surprise.

That day was the second time he saw him – in nothing but a pair of briefs, with a scar on his belly from an operation. Spencer offered his hand and hid his head in a light-blue shirt that he put on without undoing the buttons. Daniel had time to get a good look at the scar.

He remembered it well – it began at the level of the navel and was vertical, white with thick stitches either side, and ended somewhere beyond the edge of his pants.

Astrid came out of the bedroom in her dressing gown.

“What's he doing here?” asked Daniel without saying hello. “Tell him to get dressed,” he went on, without waiting for her answer. “I don't want to see him here.”

As he saw it now, gazing at an old couple waiting at the lights like him, he felt the absurdity of that situation. And of the role he had played, perhaps not entirely of his own free will. He had reacted like a father, not a son. He had thrown out a fellow of over 60 whom he had caught with his 50-something-year-old daughter.

“But can my relationship with my mother be reduced to nothing but an exchange of roles?” A few steps further on he wasn't so sure of that any more.

Astrid says nothing. She watches as Spencer obediently puts on his shoes, left, right, laces; a scarf falls from the sleeve of a grey coat onto the floor. He says goodbye from a distance and leaves.

Astrid goes up to the door, turns the lock and hangs the scarf on a peg. “I'll never forgive you for this,” she says in a strangely calm tone of voice.

Daniel looks at her mouth and will never forget the comparison that comes into his mind – Astrid's mouth looks like a wound, an open wound. Now it seems pretentious, too improbable for a “modern novel”, but as he looked at Astrid's lips that's just what he had thought, and that's how he remembers it.

Once upon a time he even envied her that mouth.

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Chapter 4

Needlessly he asks Louise if she knew he had once found Spencer with his mother.

Earlier he tells her he has taken the bus without a ticket for the first time since arriving. Louise is no longer in her dressing gown. She's wearing black trousers, and has her back to the window. She's in a green sweater, very similar to the one he has already looked at earlier today. She bought it a few days ago, and to Daniel's mind, though of course he hasn't told her this, it suits her far less than it does Aude.

"Lucky there weren't any inspectors." Louise has been working all day and didn't even notice when the sun went down. So she says, as she stands with her back to the window.

Daniel didn't notice either, but he doesn't want to talk about that.

"No, I'm sure she never told me. We'd already quarrelled by then," says Louise, taking off her glasses and wiping her eyes.

"Over the inheritance?"

"Yes, you know, of course. Your mother didn't want to deal with it. I tried to understand her, I knew about her depressions and I took it all on myself, the official stuff and the sale of the property. At first Astrid was very pleased. She rang often and thanked me, but then she suddenly started to push me. She needed the money quickly, and she had some strange grievances." Louise reaches for a packet of cigarettes. "She said she didn't trust me any more. Have you seen the lighter?"

He has, he's sure. He even had it in his hand. But he can't remember how it ended up in his pocket. Maybe he took it to the cemetery on purpose? He lights Louise's cigarette. She smokes the same kind as Astrid.

He knew all about the inheritance, Astrid's version of the legacy case, and the smell of her cigarettes.

"You know what she was like," says Daniel, feeling ridiculous defending Astrid.

Louise is also looking at him differently somehow, with the corners of her eyes smiling, or perhaps he's just imagining it.

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The story she has just heard has a different ending, maybe for just that reason. They were standing in front of him, still undressed, when Astrid shouted that he should have called. He flew into a rage – now he doesn't know why he didn't control himself. He slammed the door, not wanting to look at them any more.

He does restrain himself, however, from repeating “You know what she was like”. Now it would be more appropriate to say “You know what she wasn't like”.

Chapter 5

In the evening he imagines: in the dark, once he stops glancing at his watch, time starts to slow down and slip from the control of its hands. Finally he has his own free time. Long ago, when he was still at school, he wrote a short story about it.

He's cross that he lied to Louise and can't sleep. Can you take offence at your own self? Daniel turns onto his left side, wanting to stop responding to himself, not think in the first person any more, pointedly not notice himself in mirrors, not pick up the phone, post or e-mails, but to get away from himself, not react to his own needs, habits and name. To avoid himself, and – as far as possible – not admit himself to his own company. The sofa is more uncomfortable than usual now. To put an end to supporting himself, paying the bills, getting dressed, and cutting his wretched fingernails. Daniel turns over onto his right side. To stop existing for himself, without demeaning himself by taking his own life. (“That would mean I care”). After all, he no longer has anything in common with himself anyway.

Or maybe all he needs is to go to sleep. “Tomorrow is another day,” as Astrid often used to tell him.

Astrid is comforting him; he can feel her warm hands and tries again to catch the moment when he stops being in control of his thoughts. For a while it wakes him; he draws up his legs and cuddles up to the duvet.

Next day Daniel is standing by the window. She asked: when are you coming back? what next? – he still has that bit of the dream in his memory; in it they walk about the cemetery together, Astrid asks her questions, and Daniel says they should turn right. She

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repeats: when are you coming back? what next? He doesn't want her to keep going straight and come across a gravestone marked "Astrid Reis". Better she doesn't know about that for now. He takes her by the hand and they turn off. He can't remember how he replied, he can't remember any more.

"The light is so grey," he says, just to say something.

Louise goes up to him, to the window and puts on her glasses. In silence they gaze at the grey light.

In his dream she wasn't wearing gloves – she must have lost them somewhere; she had long, cold fingers and the corners of her eyes were smiling as he caught her hand. "But you're frozen," he said, and they were close as they once had been. So different from during their last conversation by the mirror in the living room.

"You're behaving as if you were my husband! I can't go on like this, I can't!" Daniel looked alternately at Astrid and at her reflection.

She too glanced at herself, and tidied her hair.

"Then don't. No one's telling you to be my mother."

Why did her glance in the mirror irritate him so much? He really had no patience with her. He was upset. He was aggressive and nasty. He certainly didn't have to shout, he didn't have to smash the mirror with his shoe. He could see that from her hands – he knew why she was keeping them behind her back.

"It's my fault" – he thought Astrid's voice was shaking more than her hands. "I shouldn't have brought you up like this. I shouldn't have had you."

He well remembers himself, his mother and the entire room suddenly bursting into tiny little bits, and that remark of hers: he would understand her when he had children himself.

When will he have children himself?