Extracts
from
The Last Supper by Paweł Huelle

25-29 *In this extract, the narrator has his first encounter with Mateusz, the painter, who twenty years later will invite him and his other old friends from this era to pose for his version of The Last Supper. Already, the Engineer, who represents avant-garde art, is jealously critical of Mateusz and is causing him trouble.*

The noise of the electric train came rattling through the open windows of the old German villa. Mateusz was standing in the kitchen alcove trying to find a corkscrew, while the Engineer stared about him with a look on his face implying that all the oils, sketches, drawings, water colours and gouaches filled him with total disgust. He went up to the easel, then the wall, almost pressing his nose against the canvas as if he were very short-sighted, then turned towards us wearing a grimace and lisped: "Dweadful, tewible, howendous!"

"What's your point?" asked Mateusz as the cork finally popped from the bottle of Bulgarian wine and he poured it into some thick, tea-stained glasses. "Maybe you could paint it better yourself?"

The Engineer made a face that implied extreme irritation with a dash of contempt.

"The point is not whether something is well or badly painted," he drawled. "The point is whether it's painted at all. Fuckin' 'ell, can't you understand that?"

"To be honest, no, I can't really," I said, looking the Engineer straight in the eye. "This man, nailed to the earth's sphere," I went on, pointing at the canvas, "is screaming so loud he can be heard in every galaxy. But God is not there."

"Fuckin' 'ell," said the Engineer, clutching his head and looking at our host, "who've you got here? A virgin incowupt?"

"This is his," said Mateusz, holding up a copy of my first book, which admittedly was at that point just a typescript in cardboard covers, "but you wouldn't understand it all the same."

"What an arsehole," snarled the Engineer, "a writer on art is a piece of shit."

Mateusz nodded indulgently, implying that he'd heard it all a hundred times before and did not necessarily agree with the Engineer, who had now gone entirely on the offensive; hopping about like a boxer, he was running up to each canvas and board in turn shouting: "And what the fuck is this? Fucking litewature! Paint is just dwied-up blood! It's ancient dwied-up sperm! Painting is kaput! It's over. Can't you see that?"

Suddenly he took a razor out of his pocket, which, as I can see now, hadn't got there by accident, went up to the painting I'd just mentioned, "Ecce Homo", and slowly, without a word, with long strokes of the blade, ripped it into narrow strips. Mateusz was astonished, maybe even mesmerised at the sight of this destruction: the point being that it was planned, deliberately performed before his eyes, so patently and brazenly that it took your breath away.

"This is diwect action," said the Engineer, stepping back with a satisfied air from the canvas, which now resembled wallpaper, or a honeycomb – "new age art, and you can give that", he said, ripping off a strip of canvas and tossing it on the paint-spattered floorboards, "to the whores at the Beehive for sanitawy towels!" And he burst into nervous laughter, so loud that it briefly drowned out the clatter of the trains.

Mateusz didn't move an inch. But as soon as the Engineer went up to the next canvas he blocked his path, and for a while they grappled in complete silence. This was the first debate on the subject of modern art I ever took part in. In those days the Engineer, of whom you will hear a lot more, was assistant to Professor Śledź at the Academy, and the story of his final exam had passed into school legend – twenty-five canvases painted red and slashed with a razor, given top marks by the committee. So there I stood next to them, and to tell the truth I was horrified. Mateusz finally seized the razor from the Engineer's hand, put the blade to his neck and hissed: "You can cut off your own dick for all I care, but keep your hands off my stuff!"

Only then did the real fight begin. It would be too long and tedious to describe – I'll just tell you they gave each other a real beating, hitting hard and falling to the floor a few times. Luckily the razor fell on the ground too, and I got the chance to pick it up and hide it in my pocket. The two adversaries knocked over just about everything in the room: the easel, chairs, bedside table, lamp, cabinet and stool. The end was equally impressive. Mateusz picked up the Engineer like a heavy beam of wood and hurled him at the Venetian window. Can you imagine the commotion? It wasn't just the advocate of revolution that went sailing onto the lawn from the first floor, but the window frame and a thousand slivers of glass went flying down there too.

A draught came gusting through the studio, and dozens of sheets of paper were caught up by the wind, whirling between the walls and ceiling before finally coming to land on the floor like a flock of gulls.

"Should someone who calls themselves an engineer be preaching on the subject of art?" Mateusz was standing at the basin, washing the blood from his face. "I know it's a sign of the times: the city, the machine, the proletariat, but does it have to go that far?"

I was listening to him and not listening all at once. I was holding a sheet of paper on which a system of circles and parallel lines formed something shaped like a Christmas tree.

"Oh, that's the Kabbalah!" said Mateusz, distinctly cheering up. "At the top you've got the Crown, and at the very bottom the Kingdom!"

He opened another bottle of wine and as if nothing had happened gave me an introduction to this secret knowledge.

"The column of balance is the most important one," he said, "but even more curious is the fact that before He made the world God must have had to shrink Himself for there to be enough room. You see? For there to be enough room! But why did you tell the Engineer God isn't there? Don't you believe in Him? Maybe you're an atheist?"

The conversation would probably have proved extremely interesting, if it weren't for the fact that just then three policemen entered the studio. Who called them? Mr and Mrs Zielenko, of course. They lived underneath the studio, and their crude, secretive nature was unspeakably offended by having to live next door to artists. Resettled here straight from the countryside, they only had one hobby: more or less once a week, whenever they heard anything louder than the patter of mice or saw something that surpassed their imagination, they called the police.

"Citizen," began the sergeant, "what's going on in here? Making noise again?"

97-102 *Many years later, the Last Supper painting has finally been unveiled but immediately destroyed by the "avant-gardists". The narrator wonders what else Mateusz could have done, before one of several interludes about the thoughts of Scottish landscape artist David Roberts during his visit to the Holy Land in the 1840s.*

Perhaps Mateusz made a mistake? If he had followed Saint John consistently, perhaps instead of spending several years on the painting he would have made a video installation in a single evening? Imagine a church full of people, twelve tramps drafted in from the station, and the artist using a basin, a sponge and a cloth to wash their cracked, festering, fungus-ridden feet. If to end with he had poured the water into twelve bottles, corked them and handed them out among the audience as works of art, the avant-gardists would have had nothing to coat in acid. Recorded on tape and played back *da capo* on monitors, the Supper according to Saint John would have toured one gallery after another. And what if the artist had drunk a swig of water from the basin after performing those ablutions? Or – to consider a rather shocking variant – poured it into a goblet labelled "The Holy Grail" and passed it around the assembled company, just to wet their lips?

In that case you'd probably say: "But then he wouldn't have been himself any more, not a painter but someone completely different – he'd have become just like all the rest, who do things like that on a mass scale…" You'd be right. As Moses ben Jacob Cordovero used to say, God is any kind of reality, but not every reality is God. The avant-gardists proclaim quite the opposite in relation to art. Since they accept it as being anything, they also accept anything as art. The only thing they don't accept is whatever doesn't come from them. They make full use of cult followers and the holy inquisition, but I don't want to go any further down that road because it doesn't belong in the chronicle I am sending you in episodes, and I'd like to finish this one with David Roberts: we left him on the dusty road, on the other side of the brook of Cedron, the side nearer the city, on the road that since the 1967 war bears the name of Melchizedek. Soon he will come to the foot of Mount Zion and then turn along a not very deep, shady gorge, with the walls of the old city to his right the whole time.

He is not a biblical scholar, just a draughtsman, but he has prepared for this journey very carefully. And so he knows that the building on the summit of Zion, which he cannot see from here, but which he is now in the act of passing, like an invisible parallel at sea, he knows that this inconspicuous stone house, where the body of King David lies on the ground floor, long since turned to dust, is not really the site of the Last Supper, that *anagaion mega estromenon, hetoimon* – "a large upper room, furnished and prepared", as mentioned by Mark, it is not the location of that farewell, that blessing, that mystery, because it was only recognised as such in the seventh century after the death of the Messiah, under the patriarch Sophronius. Throughout the preceding centuries it was claimed that the Passover supper took place in one of the caves in the Cedron valley, on Golgotha or at the site where later

the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre was built. These versions are supported by the sixth century *Jerusalem Breviary*.

David Roberts does not regard this information as of fundamental importance: wherever it happened, it happened somewhere in the near vicinity, at roughly the same time of year – the day before yesterday when he arrived in Jerusalem was the start of the month of Nissan. Now he is trying to unearth from memory the various representations of the Last Supper that he has seen with his own eyes or in copies. None of them corresponds to what he imagines. He came to Jerusalem after a long expedition to Egypt and Syria, he knows what the chambers in inns, caravanserais, better and worse trading posts and posting houses look like, and he knows that despite the passage of time it is these rooms that are more like the *anagaion mega* mentioned by Mark and Luke than the breathtaking vistas of Ghirlandaio or Veronese, painted with Renaissance panache, a splendour of brightly coloured robes, a courtly display and true respect for decorum.

How should it be expressed? The greyness of the dust that the wind from the desert brings here always and everywhere, mixed with the white and the bile yellow of the stones used to build everything here, all plunged in the unnatural light of oil lamps (they give a quite different glow than candles) produces a particular shade of ochre with a narrow, monochromatic spectrum. None of the colourful orgies of Perugino, Titian or Signorelli, bright blue, red, yellow, white and green – these are fantastical combinations, but in this land an *anagaion mega* was nothing like a Roman villa, even if just a poky, rented *cubiculum* with no decorations at all and the minimum number of fittings.

David Roberts stops for a while, with Zion rising behind him by now, and a straight section of road ahead at the foot of the walls leading to the Jaffa Gate, and the Tower of David visible in the vista. This view will be one of the finest in his book. Now he regrets that he did not follow Governor Achmet Aga's advice and take a porter with an ass. His case full of drawing equipment is heavy, the leather strap is cutting into his shoulder, his shirt is sticking to his body and sweat is streaming from under his hat. The cool mountain air of Jerusalem has been driven far out to sea by a sticky gust of desert wind that is only a mild harbinger of the summer heat to come.

Only Mark and Luke mention a man bearing a pitcher of water. Two disciples were supposed to have been sent out after him, to reach the location for the supper and make arrangements for Passover with the landlord. *Estromenon, hetoimon*: furnished and prepared. Mark was the son of the owner of the house. When Jesus came down at sunrise with the disciples, over Cedron to Gethsemane, the guards guided by Judas knocked at that door first of all. Only afterwards did they set off into the valley. Mark wanted to get there first. He ran at breakneck speed in his nightshirt, taking short cuts, anything to warn Jesus. He was in time, but that didn't change anything. David Roberts cannot remember where he learned this detail that isn't actually in the Gospels, but that seems as real as what he has seen and is now looking

at: the stones on the path down the Mount of Olives, or the acanthuses growing in between the bare rocks of the valley of Hinon.

As he moves onwards, his thoughts return to Goya's painting. He saw it during his travels in Spain, at Santa Cueva in Cadiz. Although Jesus has a distinct halo, and the disciples lying nearest to the viewer are dressed in Spanish peasant breeches, this picture is the only one that corresponds to the Scot's mental image of the Last Supper. Everything in it, even including the rough, bare walls in the corners of the room, is sparse and simple, as if accidental – the shabby couches, poor robes, the barely visible and apparently incomplete tableware. The scene of blessing the bread (though perhaps the wine too – that cannot be confirmed) is steeped in exactly the sort of light that, as David Roberts knows well by now, is the only kind that could have filled the *anagaion mega*. The disciples are lying about in a rather slovenly way. One of them, clearly overcome by wine, is asleep, resting his head on the table, which is as low as a footstool. Painting a last supper like that one, thinks Roberts as he remembers his impressions at Santa Cueva, in ultra-Catholic Spain, dripping with gold, the Baroque, the hypocrisy of the clergy and the tears of the general populace, was an act of courage, mad determination or extremely profound intuition. Because it wasn't insanity or even less stupidity.

The Scottish cobbler's son, who throughout the art academy had an apprenticeship with an interior decorator called Gavin Beugo, and later worked for a travelling theatre, moves onwards. A short, sudden gust of desert wind tugs at the burnouses of the sheikhs riding by along the road. David Roberts squints, shields his face with a batiste handkerchief marked with his monogram and hopes that in thirty minutes' time, when he reaches the Basilica of the Holy Sepulchre, he will still have time to make at least one preliminary sketch.

104-109 *Chapter Five opens with a disturbing dream about the fall of Constantinople.*

The piercing pain in his foot, wrist and doubled-up body seemed unbearable. If not for his fear of the stick held by the guard who was slowly pacing the two rows of stocks, occasionally striking one of the prisoners on the head or the back, if not for his terror at this new, extra dose of pain, he would have shouted loudly to relieve his suffering. If only he could see again. But by the Gate of Charisios, also called the Adrianople, he had ended up too near an exploding bomb. He remembered a deafening whistle, followed by darkness. Once he had been dragged to the stocks, he regretted that none of the janissaries had stabbed him with a dagger. To be wounded, chained into a hunched position, and on top of that blind meant the worst thing possible.

He had lost his bearings – he, who used to know every stone of the sacred *polis* and could make his way blindfolded – as people liked to say over a glass of wine – from Phanarion, for example, along the Valens Aqueduct into any narrow, winding little street in the Venetian quarter or the even more remote Genoese quarter at the foot of the Acropolis; he, who by the smell of a bakery, a well or a fruit stall could recognise not just a district of the city, not just a street, but even a precisely defined section of it; he, who breathed to the rhythm of this city, just as a child in its mother's womb lives by her pulse and breathing – now he was unable to identify the location of the wooden stocks to which he had been chained with a hundred other slaves. A vague hypothesis led him to believe they had been driven somewhere to the south, so they might be near the Golden Gate in the neighbourhood of Saint John Studion, but they might just as well be anywhere else: in the northern part of the city, for example, near Saint John the Baptist, close to the Golden Horn. Here or there, the sea was roaring nearby, and that was a sign that soon they would load them onto ships and carry them away to one of the markets in desert-bound Timbuktu or rich Isfahan.

He had also lost his sense of time. A night, a day and a night may have passed since the moment when, already chained to the stocks, the brand had been burned onto his arm. It was probably after the second night that another man had been chained to the stocks beside him. Once a day they were given a handful of dried, worm-eaten dates and a sip of water served from a small wooden pail on a stinking sponge. They urinated and defecated underfoot. If not for the rain that now, as the sun was going down, had begun to fall in copious streams, the stench and stinging flies would have increased their suffering many times over. The water was cleansing their tormented bodies, quenching their gasping throats, and its constant roar made strictly forbidden conversation possible, muffling more than just a whisper, because the guards had taken shelter in a nearby portico. They must have had a cauldron of

hot food on a fire there. A strong odour of falafels pervaded the poor wretches' nostrils with such intensity that some of them began to vomit with hunger.

"I am Milan Duškov," whispered the new man beside him, "from the town of Kikinda in Vojvodina. What about you?" Indeed, his Greek was marked by a Slavonic accent.

"Antony of Trabzond," he replied with the greatest effort, overcoming the pain in his throat, where a splinter of arrow was still stuck.

"Ah, Trabzond," the Serb rejoiced. "Apparently your ruler has already sent ships to rescue us. He is bringing Armenians, Georgians, Bulgarians and even Russians. Are you his courier?"

"John IV," he slowly wheezed, "will do nothing to fight Mehmed. He has one leaky battleship. And a hundred eunuchs for his entire army. I was born here. My father came from Trabzond. He was a merchant. And I became a soldier."

In this final remark the Serb could sense bitterness. The monks and the soldiers were in the worst situation. Those who hadn't been killed in the victors' first fury were going into slavery for ever. The merchants were needed by the new rulers. As usual.

"I am a soldier too," replied the Serb after a short pause. "I escaped from the Sultan's camp. I fought on your side."

He did not reply, because he could no longer speak. The other man took that as a reproach.

"Our despot Djuradj Branković," he slowly explained, "is a vassal of Mehmed, who conquered us before you. Haven't you heard that?"

"Yes," he whispered at last, "I have."

"At the Sultan's demand he had to send us here. One hundred and seventy-eight horsemen. But we hate the Turks. That's why I escaped to your side. I was at the Holy Roman Gate when they found the emperor."

The Serb's declaration moved him greatly.

"Did you see him with your own eyes?" he whispered.

"I was near him through the final hours. Very near."

The rain had changed into a real cloudburst. Strong gusts of wind coming in from Anatolia were literally shifting a wall of water now in one, now the other direction. But Milan Duškov went on telling his story without stopping in a lowered tone, and his declaration had something of a lofty epic poem about it, though the subtleties of the aorist tense and the refinements of Greek syntax were evidently alien to him.

He had made his way to the city two days before it was stormed, telling the sentries that he was a Serb from Branković's cavalry. Indeed, they had no doubts. Afterwards, once inside the gate, he was interrogated in the presence of an officer. He quoted a remark that made a huge impression on them: "Better to die fighting than to live in shame." They did not know that it was uttered seventy-four years earlier by

Prince Lazar Hrebljanović to his troops before the Battle of Kosovo. He was surprised to be assigned to Constantine's personal guard. A deserter is always a deserter, even when he swells the ranks. That day they had all borne up bravely, until Giustiniani was wounded. The Emperor asked him not to leave the field of battle, but Giustiniani had no strength left, he was staggering on his feet and finally made for his own people, back to the Genoese ship. That was the beginning of the end. The Genoese lost heart, and janissaries swarmed in the breach in the gate made by the Turkish artillery.

"Is there any man among you who will run me through with his sword?" cried the Emperor. "Take courage, and do not surrender me to dishonour!"

But no one was brave enough to carry out the king's wishes.

The Emperor cast off his robes, and in the simple clothing of a soldier plied his sword at the Holy Roman Gate. He killed many. But just as many rose up immediately behind them. Stabbed in the side by a spear, and at once cut down by a janissary, he fell dead, like hundreds of others, and was soon buried under a heap of corpses. When Mehmed entered the city, he immediately ordered a search for the body of Constantine. Someone must have reported that he was fighting by this and no other gate. He was recognised by his boots. Only the kings wore shoes with a double-headed eagle on the tops. His head was cut off and taken to Mehmed, who asked the Megadux Lucas Notaras, who had not been killed: "Is this the head of your master?" "Yes," replied the Megadux, "that is the head of my emperor." Stuck on a lance, it was paraded before all the troops. Then for half a day it hung on a column in the Augusteon. Next Mehmed ordered it to be skinned and stuffed with straw, then announced that it would be taken around all the countries of Mohammed, starting with Egypt, to show that the Turks would never withdraw from Europe. That was how the last emperor Constantine XI Paleologos Dragaš, who refused to flee from besieged Constantinople, met his end. His body was thrown into a ditch for the dogs to eat. Isaiah was not wrong when he said that all your good deeds shall be like a bloody rag.

Disguised as a petty tradesman, Milan Duškov had wandered about Phaleron. He saw what always happens in conquered cities – rape, robbery, people begging for mercy, children impaled on pikes, monks placing their heads beneath swords and axes. Outside a Venetian bakery one of Branković's cavalry patrols had recognised him.

"Your king never disowned his mother," he concluded. "That was why to the surname Paleologos he always added the Serbian Dragaš, as if in memory of the Battle of Kosovo."

The rain had stopped. The guards were slowly and reluctantly returning to the stocks. Someone was struck with a stick and cried out in Italian: "God have mercy on us!" But God was silent, just as if the Temple of Hagia Sophia were a hotbed of crime and not prayer, and as if He now favoured the victors, not the vanquished.

They were unchained from the stocks and lined up for transport onto the ship. He felt that as a blind man he would either immediately be killed or sent to the galleys. And there he would die, in filth and humiliation, after several years of terrible labour. The fear was paralysing. He felt a deep pang in his heart. He heard the wail of the muezzin and woke to find his pyjamas drenched in sweat. But it was not the summons to *salat al fagr*, the morning prayer – it was his mobile phone, carefully set to buzz as usual. Antoni Julian Berdo was gradually returning to reality, digesting scraps of images from his dream.

174-180 *In this extract, Dr Lewada and the female hitch-hiker he has picked up are stuck in the traffic caused by the explosion of a terrorist bomb. They encounter a strange time warp, and Lewada tells his passenger about an incident that changed his life.*

Silence had fallen in the car. Near the flyover the police sent them down a diversion. Instead of driving down the main artery that linked all three cities on the bay they were forced, like the container lorries heading for the port, to crawl slowly along the streets. After a while Dr Lewada saw a trolleybus ahead of him. There wouldn't have been anything strange about it if not for the fact that the electrical operating system for those vehicles had been dismantled a good twenty years ago. Where on earth had it sprung from? It was moving normally, occasionally spitting sparks from its pole. Then his gaze was automatically drawn to the Ocean Lines administration building, where no shipping firm had resided for years, just banks and funds. The old neon sign with its distinctive lettering and the proud outline of an ocean liner was on display again. Near the admiralty building – because the diversion for passenger cars led all the way there – instead of a shabby pizzeria, he noticed the way in to the Kapitański bar, just like twenty years ago. Several young people, as well as a merchant navy officer, were just coming out of it. Their long hair, bell-bottom trousers, ribbons and beads reminded him of very ancient history. They happily headed towards the tourist anti-torpedo ship and the sailing yachts along the quay. Just past the roundabout, as he was turning back towards the high street, the doctor caught sight of the Roxana café terrace, which hadn't existed since the late communist era. As in those days, when he used to admire the ladies of the night from afar as they waited for their foreign sailors, so now he noticed a colourful crowd of them. Even the large awning inscribed "Co-op" that was flapping above the flock of prostitutes had something surreally nostalgic about it. But surely Fellini wasn't making a film that day in one of our three cities on the bay? The images kept appearing and disappearing before the doctor's eyes like snippets of time pulled by surprise from a dark well, just to baffle him like a mirage for a few split seconds, God knows why. But was it just an illusion? After all, the trolleybus was real, and so was the gang of prostitutes on the café terrace.

When he caught sight of a large shop sign on the high street saying PEWEX – as the long-gone communist-era duty-free shops were called – and a dense queue of several hundred people outside another shop marked RTV, he realised that for some mysterious reason he had driven into a lost side-shoot of time – in short, something had happened to him that he had only ever read about in Schulz or Lem.

He was not sure if his passenger could see the same thing, but as they crawled at snail's pace past a grocery shop with another communist era sign and a swarm of people teeming outside it, and as sleet suddenly began to fall on them from a dark

cloud, he heard her say: "At this time of year? And do you see how they're dressed?"

The car was moving forwards very slowly, driving in file through the muddy slush. The pedestrians' anoraks, overcoats, sheepskin jackets, berets, hats and shoes would have looked like something from a film costume hire shop, if not for their owners' faces, tired and grey, with an expression of hopelessness and a touch of determined cunning. Those were just the sort of hostile looks they were casting at the doctor's car and its two passengers.

"Where on earth have we ended up?" she asked, clearly anxious. "Was there no other route we could have taken?"

"This is the way we were sent," said the doctor bluntly. And as he switched on the windscreen wipers, he added: "It really is a very strange diversion."

The sleet was getting thicker. From opposite, splashing through the large puddles, two army transport trucks drove past, followed by an ambulance with its siren going.

The doctor's passenger was on the edge of hysteria.

"But it's just not possible." She was almost in tears. "There has to be some order. At least in the seasons of the year! It doesn't make sense!"

They were stuck in a queue of similarly lost cars and completely disoriented passengers. Finally the doctor said: "You asked if I believe in God. I could truly answer that yes, I do, although I am not a priest. But I once had a certain encounter. Do you see? Not a revelation. Not a discovery. But just that: an encounter."

"With God?" she asked instantly, and immediately supplied the answer: "But that's impossible."

Yet as she listened to the calm, measured phrases of Dr Lewada, who would probably never have had the nerve to make this declaration if not for this particular situation, her attention increased by the minute.

"I never said that," the doctor began, "and I'm not saying it now. No miracles. Anyway, I can't stand miracles. They just increase the numbness. It was in Paris. I'd gone there to work. On a building site. Just after getting divorced. I didn't care, I just wanted to earn some money for a flat here. No one could see the changes coming in those days. The generals were still kissing the hands of the widows of the pre-war generals. To cut a long story short, one day I really did want to die. Do you understand? Not to commit suicide, but to die. Can we achieve the latter without the former? We can, if we go down to hell. But what is hell? Being all alone. Not leading a lonely life, because millions of people live like that. Hell is cold, studied loneliness, that once adopted, cuts us off from everyone and everything. That's when a man enters the state I desired: pure and absolute nothingness."

"Did you achieve it?" she asked timidly.

For her it was astounding to follow his footsteps from the rue Boudon, where he lived in a rented cubbyhole on the sixth floor, all the way to the Jardin du

Luxembourg, the Bois de Boulogne or a boulevard by the river where he spent hours on end lying on the grass or sitting still on a bench.

To begin with, the void that filled him brought him relief, even something like happiness. But after a while, once he had abandoned his flat and become a vagrant, he felt ever more afraid that this sort of existence would continue into infinity. Finally he was lying in the underground at a closed-down metro station alone. A whole day went by, maybe two. He had stopped getting up for water, or even reaching into his bag for a roll. He had reached a state of total abandonment; if someone had wanted to do anything at all for him, give him a drink, feed him, or take him up to the surface he would have cursed them for interfering.

And yet the person whose steps he heard in the darkness did not make him feel irritated, not even when he briefly lit a match to avoid treading on him, and another one immediately after, in order to sit down beside him. For a very long time he said nothing, Lewada could hear his calm, regular breathing. Finally the man said: "I am helpless too." Not getting an answer, he added: "And completely abandoned." And when Lewada still said nothing, he went on: "I have died, just like you."

"So what have you come for?" asked the doctor quietly.

"To be with you," the man replied.

It was a shock. "If he had consoled me, encouraged or appealed to me, not to mention given me advice," Lewada continued, "I would have cursed him with all that was left of my strength and told him to go to hell. But that was all he said: 'To be with you.'."

She heard out the rest of the story, which did not in fact develop into a long tale full of unusual twists and turns. It continued in silence and darkness, just as it had begun. The man did not say anything else. Dr Lewada had merely heard him lay something on the ground (a scarf perhaps?) next to his head and lie down to rest beside him, without a single sign, gesture, word or touch.

Then he had fallen into a deep, dreamless sleep, and when he awoke, the man had gone. Lewada had stood up and followed the labyrinth of stairs out into the street, blinking at the brightness of the lights. A week later he was back in Poland, thanks to the help of a quiet, modest community of brethren.

The heavy sleet cloud was being chased away by a wind from the sea. Bathed in sunshine again, the high street looked as if time had returned to its normal dimension. There was no more trace of any puddles or heavily dressed people suffering away in shop queues. The acacias were providing the pedestrians with shade.

"So what was that?" asked the reassured passenger. "No one will believe me. A blast of winter at the start of summer!"

They were just passing the memorial cross marking the spot at the crossroads where some demonstrators once fell to the bullets of the people's national army.

“You have to assume,” said Lewada, driving into the middle lane, which was slightly less congested at last, “that the so called laws of nature are only conditional. And there’s no theory we’re as quick to accept as one we find beautiful. I have forgotten where you are heading,” he added after a pause. “That is, I meant to ask where should I drop you off.”

“I’d come to the photography session with you, but I guess your friend hasn’t planned for any women in his painting. Naturally,” she huffed, “according to tradition!” Then she added: “One more city to go. Please stop at the tram loop.”

“Why did I tell her about that?” worried Lewada. “What on earth for? But then who would you want to tell about a guy who spent a couple of days lying in the underground?” he reasoned. “She didn’t say what she thought about that, not a word. She reckons I’m making it up. Fine.”

Translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones