

Of course at first I was upset, but it happens to everyone, doesn't it? Oh God, an ordinary matrimonial quarrel, a bad day. On top of that, in the third month I felt that void inside that's a forewarning of someone's presence. Two days later we were drinking tea in the kitchen. I told Wladek I must go to the doctor. He thought I was exaggerating, but all right. When the doctor starts poking around inside you like in a car engine and announces that there's no heartbeat, the world doesn't stop. The nurses continue to walk down the corridor. The hands on the clock don't snap in two. The water in the kettle still boils. In the name of solidarity, the world really ought to stop for a minute, like the Poles do on the first of August to commemorate the Warsaw Uprising. Wladek asked if it could have happened because of stress. The gynaecologist replied that it was unlikely; selection is coded into the structure of nature. I asked Wladek to wait for me in the corridor.

As they were taking me to the ward, I saw Wladek standing in the middle of the corridor with his back to me, leaning slightly, as if resisting the current of a mountain river with the last of his strength. He didn't hear me. Peace and quiet, just wait. Three days, four nights perhaps. I can't remember a single one of Wladek's visits, though he spent all those hours with me. The only thing I can remember is the grey-blue light that cut into the room at night and froze like a block of ice, with the vague shape of nurses peeping from behind it. I pressed the red button when I felt the moment had come. I asked what I was to do with it now, and she replied that that was what the waste bin was for. Three or four centimetres, a sea horse, a tiny head like a cherry. I lay there for a long time, staring in that direction. I felt as if any moment now it would scramble its way out of there, and there'd be a tiny person standing on the floor, who'd wave at me and say: 'Hey, Mum, to hell with them! We'll be all right. Shall we go?'

I went home; for a week Wladek didn't say a word.

Usually I got up earlier and woke him for breakfast, which on Saturdays we ate together. If he hadn't slept enough, he'd chew each mouthful in silence and apply ice lumps to the puffy bags under his eyes, which dripped onto the tablecloth. 'Do you have to slice the bread so thickly? Does everything have to be done the peasant way?' he'd ask. And then he'd shut himself in his room. Sometimes I really did need his help, so I'd shout: 'Wladek, come here a minute!' If he didn't answer for some time, I knew that up there, in his

cage, a fight without rules was going on, which Wladek would lose, because soon I'd hear the delirious clatter of footsteps on the stairs, I'd see his torn underpants, and his face, not yet rinsed clean of the night, from which words as tough as nuts would fall: 'If you're going to call me, try to explain what it's about at once, or I don't know if there's any point in coming down!' In the afternoon he'd lie for hours at a time on the couch in front of the TV, smoking. Sometimes he shared the thought with me that he couldn't bear to look at my father any more. I'd sit opposite, wanting to tell him something. I believed that the appropriately tuned words could heal.

Excerpt translated by Antonia Lloyd-Jones



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[Without. The Ballad of Joanna and Wladek from
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Selected books

Fajrant, 2017

Podkrzywdzie, 2015

Cyklon, 2015

Miedza, 2013

Południe, 2013

Selected awards

Gdynia Literary Prize (2014, 2016) – nominations

Polityka's Passport Award (2015) – nomination

Beata Pawlak Award (2013) – nomination