

The next day I made an appointment at the hairdresser's and told pani Zosia to return my hair to its natural grey colour. I went into the store with brown hair and came out with it white as milk. Examining myself later in the mirror I thought I really looked like an old lady. Not a senior citizen or a mature woman or someone of advanced years, just an ordinary old lady whose face was carved with deep furrows. Those furrows had appeared early, even before I turned 50, and used to cause me a great deal of anguish. But now my face had become my ally. I didn't feel like an old lady, but I looked like one and was glad I did, since old ladies aren't so dangerous, no one suspects old ladies, and I already knew I intended to commit a crime.

I saw Jacek for the first time when winter was still in full swing. It was Wednesday, 21 March, the first day of spring, though it was even snowing and raining at the same time. Nevertheless, fed up with sitting at home for ages, I decided to get out my Nordic walking sticks from the cupboard and go out for some exercise. Mud caked on my boots and cold wind blasted in my face as I walked toward Bolina. Theoretically it's a park – at least that's what it says on the sign – but in practice it's more of a... recreation area? I don't know if that's a good way of putting it. There are two sports grounds: one soccer field and one basketball court, a playground for children, a pair of crisscrossing walkways, a restaurant with a garden and a covered area for barbecuing. Of course all this was empty that time of year, the only people I came across were an older lady with her dog and a young woman jogging stubbornly along in thin running gear.

I was making my way back freezing and tired, but in a better mood. The wind had driven away the Silesian smog and for the first time in many days you could breathe freely outside. On the way I stepped into Rabat to buy a coffee, milk and of course the inevitable meatballs in tomato sauce for lunch. That was when I saw him.

He was standing by the cool shelf, holding a pack of cheese-and-potato pierogies. I remember he glanced at me and I wanted to give him a sympathetic look, because I thought I'd found a soulmate, yet another older person living on pre-made food. Then I recognised him. It had been 50 years since we'd laid eyes on one another, yet I had no doubts. We all change with time, but amid those changes some of us maintain a certain... constancy. Like Jacek. He was now grey, hunched and wrinkly, but it was still him. His gaze passed over me indifferently on its way to the counter with the fish display. He didn't recognise me, of course not. I knew it had been a long time since I'd looked anything like the plump, dimpled girl he might remember. When I turned 40, the people I knew from college stopped recognising me, and I'd changed even more since then. So I stood there and watched him putting a greasy mackerel into his basket. I situated myself just behind him in the

checkout line, completely forgetting about the coffee and milk, and then I followed him all the way home. He lived at the end of Zamkowa Street in a one-story villa surrounded by a tall iron fence. What was on my mind as I looked at that house? As I stood at the edge of the forest, feeling the drops of drizzle landing on my face, I think nothing had occurred to me yet, I was just amazed that fate had finally thrown us so close together. Only later, on my way home, as I passed the angular 1970s apartment buildings and much older brick *familoki* with chimneys giving off grey smoke, did I realise the obvious truth: Jacek must have been among the wealthiest inhabitants of our eclectic neighbourhood. I had a two-room apartment while he had ended up with a villa. No, this was nothing so primitive as envy, rather a certain... craving for justice.

Excerpt translated by Sean G. Bye

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**ANNA  
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Born 1976

***Wiosna zaginionych [Spring of the Missing]***

ISBN: 978-83-66335-85-1; 400 pages

***Lato utraconych [Summer of the Lost]***

ISBN: 978-83-66863-10-1; 392 pages

**Publisher:** Marginesy, Warszawa 2020 & 2021

**Translation rights:** Marginesy, [k.rudzka@marginesy.com.pl](mailto:k.rudzka@marginesy.com.pl)

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*Pokuta*, 2019

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*Niepełnia*, 2017

*Łaska*, 2016

**Foreign language translations**

Rights for Kańtoch's fantasy books have been sold to Italy, Ukraine and Russia.

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Piła Crime Fiction Festival Award (2017)

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2009, 2010, 2011, 2014, 2015)

Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2013)