

If I had known that you'd be gone so soon, son, I would have loved you differently.

But what does that mean: differently? Better, more wisely, more intensely? More patiently? When you were born, I was certain that I would love you always and above all else. And I tried very hard, but then other things would turn out to be more important. So many times you would walk away disappointed. So many times I would fob you off with "a bit later", "tomorrow", "another time" or "go play on your own". Did I look you in the eye in those moments? Did I see your sorrow? Or maybe I was too busy for that too? I could have done so many things better, I could have held back so many words, controlled so many gestures. Why was I not capable of doing that? After all, son, you were the most important.

Things weren't bad between us, were they? I never hit you, I listened to you, and I talked with you, though maybe not enough. But we have no shortage of beautiful memories. I remember us walking through meadows in bloom; it's summer and the grasshoppers are chirping. There are sandwiches in my knapsack and raspberry juice in a heavy glass bottle. We're walking along a narrow path, and I'm telling you about animals and trees, I'm summarising the adventures of Tom Sawyer and stories from the Bible. I'm telling you about Abraham, Isaac, Jacob and Esau. When I think back to those stories now, what I have in front of my eyes is not the desert where they took place but the meadow and you, walking a few steps in front of me in your sandals, your head bent down. I see you crouching down to pick up a stone, a stick, a tarnished coin. And I'm telling you about the bowl of lentil pottage, about Jacob wrestling with the angel, about Joseph's brothers. I had known those stories for as long as I can remember and felt I could tell them well. I don't know if you were listening or if you were absorbed in searching for treasures. You used to bring so many of them home. Blown fuses, bottle tops, a knife with a rotten handle. You would pick up this or that and ask if you could bring it home, if Mum wouldn't be upset, and I would always say it was fine.

How am I supposed to remember you now? Those who didn't know you for as long surely have an easier time of it. They can quickly think back to your first meeting. So can I. Because of course I remember picking you both up from the maternity ward; I remember the pale blue of the blankets, the smell of the corridor. And you: fragile, defenceless, all bundled up. This is the scene I would like to recall when somebody mentions your name. It would be wonderful if that is what I could remember first.

But another image keeps coming back. For years I have tried to obliterate it, to efface it like a prison tattoo, but in vain. I never asked you about that day, I didn't have the courage; in general, I asked too few questions and

proceeded straight to the answers. I considered myself a wise father who knows everything about his child. And when I did ask about something, it was meaningless. I asked you how things were at school and at the playground, about food and about your classes. Of course these were serious matters – they were the fabric of your daily life – but my questions were not serious. Because I knew the answers in advance and only expected confirmation. They were questions just for the sake of asking questions, to keep the conversation going, faking contact. You didn't like them, and I would bristle at your perfunctory answers. But how were you supposed to answer? Give me a detailed account of every lesson and break at school, repeat every word and describe your friends' every reaction?

I didn't want answers; I knew that everything was fine at school, everything was fine at the playground, everything was fine everywhere. "School is school," you would say, and I would take that for impertinence. But that's exactly how I had answered my own father. Or rather, that's how I would have answered him if he had asked. He didn't ask; he'd wait until I got back from school and say, "You're home? Go bring in some wood." That was all. So in order not to be like my father, I asked, and I was exactly like him. Uninterested.

Excerpt translated by Eliza Marciniak



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Selected novels

Poniewczasie, 2019

Wrócenie z wnętrzości, 2015

Sto dni bez słońca, 2014

Selected awards

Krakow UNESCO City of Literature Literary Award (2020)

Polityka's Passport Award (2014) – nomination

Nike Literary Award – nomination (2013)

Jerzy Żuławski Literary Award (2011)

Janusz A. Zajdel Award (2008)