

# HOMELAND

BY: MARCIN PINIAK



At first, I only saw the face. A delicate smile reflected in the window of an underground carriage. The eyes of an angel. The one who would visit me several hours later - dressed in a khaki uniform, it saluted me and

stood there in silence. Heavy drops of rain fell from us, to the earth beneath our feet, smelling of spring. In the morning, I realised time had come to tell this story.

## Salt of the earth

The first image is a frost-covered window, and a copper kettle purring on an old stove. His wrinkled, work-worn hands carving the sign of the cross in a loaf of bread. In the distance, the skeletons of trees swaying, weighed with snow, and crystal clear, crystal cold sky. Silence. Over an ancient television set, the Virgin Mary with babe held at her breast, and beside them a calendar, its pages falling like leaves.

Each day, he pulled another loose, and tossed it into the stove. Then he took the bucket out to the well, a small, copper-coloured dog scampering round his legs. When he did visit his daughter and grandchildren in the big town, the mutt waited for him at the village bus stop. Since Aniela's departure, there was only the two of them left. The days went by slowly, filled with labour and visits to the cemetery, where she waited for him, where all formalities had been settled. A bow to the priest, who left church after mass in a pair of wellies to now check on his bovine flock.

Shopping in the local co-op, for bread, matches, salt. He had been limping since the war, unable to go any distance without his pushbike. He was lucky to still have the leg. This thanks to a German surgeon, who worked on it after he was taken into captivity, following the fight for Warsaw. He had saved the limb,

master of his craft. When the weather changed, the limp tore at him, helped only by applications of Zygmunt's medicinal nut paste. - The War? Waste of breath, sir, terrible. Everything in that Warsaw a mess. Blood ran down the gutters. I was a marksman, on a CKM heavy machine gun. A grenade struck us, Tearing Wladzio to shreds, same with Jozek, from nearby Starachowiec. Good lads, they were. I was the only one left, crippled somewhat. But I can't complain. The

German's are people too. Bauer saved my Aniela from prison when they were taking her down to be shot.

Aniela was his wife. Eight years now, resting down in the earth. They met in Germany, in the camps. Got married in a field, in secret. After the war, they did it right, with a priest, with rings, guests and a reception, there beneath that big conker tree, out the front of the house.

- They locked her in prison for the dress she was wearing, sir. She'd got some spare material from a German lady. It was the only way then. Nazi gendarmes stopped her as she was passing through the village in that damned dress. Straight into a cell, up the her knees in water. She was as good as gone. They treated people like dogs, worse even. That German, the one I was working for, he was a decent sort.

When the Russians came in, I was given a gun and told, that if I want, this Rudolf - that was his name, I think - was mine to finish off. - No - I said. I won't kill, he's a good man and you do nothing to him neither, 'cause when the need came, he took some ham and vodka and bartered my Anielka out of that prison. After that hellhole, she stuffed herself silly - almost died of it. They ruined her health in there.

He spent a few months in a camp himself, near Frankfurt. They dug the earth day in, day out. The rains had turned it to hard clay. Boiled broccoli for lunch with black bread. Those who could no longer dig, would have their head held down in that mud, with a Nazi boot, until the poor soul suffocated. They thought we weren't good enough to waste bullets on. Rudolf rescued him. Thanks were due. Aniela was working for a German woman two villages along. That's how they met. "Polska" - he remembers the road sign when, after the liberation, they were making their way back on carts loaded with their "worldly goods", Lord have mercy.

He didn't want to come back, what with the rumours about the kind of freedom they were heading into. But she wanted to go home, to her father and the farm. The house had a yard out front and a few hectares of soil. She bore him three children. Six of her siblings had to be paid off. With these two hands - nothing else, with them alone he, paid for that land.

- The earth, sir, she's our mother. She gives us life, and we must look after her in return.

## **The White Horse**

The summer gave bountiful harvest that year. The ghosts sent down their blessings, thick waves of wheat strands dancing on the breeze. The orchard smelt of apples, heaped high in wicker baskets. The old mare stood patiently by the cart, while Zygmunt sharpened his scythes on the stump of the birch tree. Aniela was baking cakes and washing strawberries to go with the dumplings.



Plumes of grey smoke burst forth from the summer kitchen chimney stack. In the tin pail fresh, morning milk waited, hens being chased round the courtyard by a wily cockerel. A huge barn, wide open back and front, see-through, and beyond its gates, to the south, acacias and then fields. The sun vanished behind the horizon, turning everything red. There was slaughtering going on in the farm next door, the neighbour's daughter getting hitched. The courtyard was filled with the aroma of smoked ham.

It was early to bed, and rise at dawn. He would get on his bike and ride on his rounds. That's when she liked to sit in an armchair in the small room and smoke. He chided her for it. Other

times she would take the prayer book in her hands and, in silence, sit there with her eyes closed, motionless.

He remembers how she reeled on the ground when her mother was struck down. Wild howls, all the way up to heaven. Hair being torn by the roots. A crippled father and seven little rascals to look after. She was nine then. Had to learn everything. There was no time left for anything else.

Little Anielka wanted to go to school, but it had to end at third grade. Only one of the brothers managed to finish his studies. Then he became an officer and they tattooed a number on his hand in Auschwitz. By some miracle, he managed to escape when being transported to a worksite. Their son, who drives long-distance lorries, looks after them. Brings them Ciociosan wine and tinned syrups and cigarettes, and recently even a cooker from West Germany, big enough to bake up to three sugar loaves at once.

He remembers how Zygmunt, when little Rysio was still at school, unfairly punished him. Because the teacher accused him of stealing a classmate's fountain pen. For hours he kneeled on dry peas, his hands weighed down holding bricks, his cheeks running with tears, as he screamed at his father that it was a lie. And so it turned out in the end. Even the school governor apologised to Zygmunt in person. It was a blow, to have punished his son unjustly. He bought him a new fountain pen to take to school and went tout into the fields to weep, for having hurt his own kin. - Zygmunt has a heart of gold, but he's a nervous sort and hard on himself - she would say.

When she was dying after the stroke, in and out of consciousness, he took her strongly by the hand and said:

- Wife, if you can hear me, please look at me...

And she then, as he spoke, turned her head his way and did look at him, and a moment later she expired and her hand turned cold in his grasp. That day everything changed, and he did not look at any other women, though he could have, for when he was living with his daughter in town later, he had several proposals.

They took him to live up in town, because he got awful ill and if they hadn't come to visit just then, he would have been gone for certain. But it was no life in those concrete cages, with all those staircases. Comfy enough, for sure, close to the loo, just the other side of the wall, water on tap, gas - not like it was back on the farm. Maybe better even for a man's later years. He's not sure himself. Sometimes, he liked to go down to the station, where they boarded the trams. He would sit on a bench and could not get his head round how different the world had become - modern, hectic and nervous somehow.

It was good to think he didn't have long to go, because he couldn't understand much any more and there was no place for him either, what with people talking to each other on phones without cables across the world, or his grandson showing him photos on a computer screen, though his eyes could hardly see. It was all too much.

There, on the farm, the night was deaf and stars shimmered in the

sky. Sometimes on a Saturday, they would sit on old acacia logs near the road and tell magic tales. Aniela told one about a white, wild horse, its long mane trailing behind it on the wind. That was the spirit of this land. A clean as a tear.

Zygmunt, when the earth started vanishing beneath mists at dusk, would see spooks and apparitions. They ran across bales of hay real quick, and the dogs went mad. The ghosts of the dead would enter their courtyards, where doors were guarded by crosses and hanging garlic cloves. When people are good and respect the land, that's when the good ghosts appear, and the bad ones keep away. But all that is gone now, people no longer believe, no longer see and they think they are smarter, having big televisions. Sometimes he would go out on the balcony in that big town and look at the rows of windows, all lit up with the glow of those screens.

Something had finished, and he felt that his time was coming. All Saints Day. Zygmunt stands in his field, tears in his eyes, the house gone, only a broken picture of Christ in a boat lying on the razed ground, reaching some undefined shore. Somewhere beneath the rubble of his home lie his medals, in their red boxes, and his green veteran's uniform. The courtyard is covered with weeds, and in the barn, suspended from ropes, hang Aniela's dresses, the material weathered by the rains.

The well had dried up, and the wind had toppled the fences. There were cows grazing in his field, rented out now, and the road was lit by a newly erected lamppost. His friends no longer visit the cemetery, seeing as they are there already. Time is running its course.

The day of the funeral. There was a banner and the priests faltering voice. A handful of earth from his own field hit the lid of his coffin with a dull thud. The air behind the barn hung heavy, the young willows bowing in mourning. The family talked about circumstances and aspects of the will.

Only memory remained - two small pebbles and reflections on the face of Christ as his boat finally hit shore.

Translation by [Marek Kazmierski](#)