Brigid Pasulka

A LONG, LONG TIME AGO AND ESSENTIALLY TRUE

For Anna and Anita,
without whom
my Krakow would not exist

Let me gaze once more on Krakow,
at her walls, where every
brick and
every
stone is dear to me.
— Pope John Paul II on the
Krakow Błonia, June 10, 1979

1

A Faraway Land

The pigeon was not one to sit around and pine, and so the day after he saw the beautiful Anielica Hetmańska up on Old Baldy Hill, he went to talk to her father.

The Pigeon’s village was two hills and three valleys away, and he came upon her only by Providence, or “by chance,” as some would start to say after the communists and their half-attempts at secularization.

He happened to be visiting his older brother, Jakub, who was living at the old sheep camp and tending the Hetmański flock through the summer; she happened to be running an errand for the Fates and her father to drop off a bottle of his special herbal ovine fertility concoction. Ordinarily, of course, a maiden meeting with a bachelor alone — and over the matter of ovine procreation no less — would be considered *verboten* or *nilzya* or whatever the Polish equivalent was before the Nazis and the Soviets routed the language and appropriated all the words for forbiddenness. But the Pigeon’s brother, Jakub, was a simpleton, a gentle simpleton, and the risk of Anielica twisting an ankle in the hike was greater than any danger posed by Jakub.

The Pigeon happened to be climbing up the side of the hill just as the sun was sliding down, and when he spotted his brother talking to the girl in front of the old sheep hut, he stopped flat in his shadow and ducked behind a tree to watch. The breeze was blowing from behind, and he couldn’t make out a word of what they were saying, but he could see his brother talking and bulging his eyes. He was used to his brother’s way of speaking by now, and he was only reminded of it when he saw him talking to strangers. Jakub spoke with a clenched jaw, his lips spreading and puckering around an impenetrable grate of teeth, which, along with the lack of pauses in his thoughts, created a low, buzzing monotone. The only inflection to his words came through his eyes, which bugged out when there was a word he wanted to stress, then quickly receded. It was very much like a radio left on and stuck at the edge of a station: annoying at first, but quite easy to ignore after the first twenty years or so. If you were not used to talking to him, the common stance was to lean backward, one foot pointed to the side, looking for an end to the loop of monologue that never came, finally reaching in and snapping one of his sentences in half before muttering a quick good-bye and making an escape. But the girl was not like this at all. In fact, she seemed to be leaning in toward Jakub, her nodding chin following his every word, her parted lips anticipating what he would say next with what very closely resembled interest and pleasure.

She was absolutely stunning. She had strong legs and high cheekbones, a blood-and-milk complexion and Cupid’s-bow lips, and the Pigeon was suddenly full of admiration for his brother for having the courage to stand there and have an ordinary conversation with such a beautiful creature. He crouched behind the pine tree, watching them for perhaps half an hour, and he started toward the hut only once she was on her way down the other side of the hill.

“Who was *that?*”

His brother stared wistfully at the empty crest of the hill long after she had disappeared.

“. . . That, oh, that, that is the angel, she brought me medicine, for the sheep, not for me, and she also brought me some fresh bread, you know, she comes to visit me very often, she is the daughter of Pan Hetmański, she brought me herbs for his sheep, so they will have more sheep, and I didn’t see you coming, how long were you watching . . .” Jakub breathed in deeply through his teeth.

“The angel? What do you mean, ‘the angel’?” The Pigeon and the rest of the family were always vigilant for signs of his brother’s simpleness turning into something more worrying.

“. . . if I knew you were there I would have introduced you, even though she came to see me, she comes to see me often, and ‘the angel’ is her *name* — Anielica — and she is Pan Hetmański’s daughter, she is going to come again sometime soon, she said, maybe she will bring the herbs or bread or . . .”

“She *is* very beautiful,” the Pigeon said, and he brought the milk pail of Sunday dinner into the sheep hut and set it down on the bench. His brother followed.

“. . . maybe a book, sometimes she reads to me, yes, she is very beautiful, isn’t she, more beautiful than mama, don’t tell mama that, but do tell mama that I like the socks she knitted me, it is very cold up here this summer, not during the day but at night, and Pan Hetmański brought extra blankets up last week, he is very nice, and they have two dozen sheep, but it is strange that they do not live in a nicer house, it is just a hut over in Half-Village, nothing special, our house is much nicer, I think . . .”

Sometimes the talking could go on forever.

The thing was to act, and the Pigeon knew just what to do.

Throughout history, from medieval workshops to loft rehabs in the E.U., we Poles have always been known by our *złote rączki,* our golden hands. The ability to fix wagons and computers, to construct Enigma machines and homemade wedding cakes, to erect village churches and American skyscrapers all without ever opening a book or applying for permits or drafting a blueprint. And since courting a beautiful girl by using a full range of body parts has only recently become acceptable, in the spring of 1939 the Pigeon made the solemn decision to court Anielica through his hands. Specifically, he vowed to turn her parents’ modest hut into the envy of the twenty-seven other inhabitants of Half-Village, into a dwelling that would elicit hosannas-in-the-highest every time they passed.

Besides Jakub, the Pigeon had eight sisters, who had taught him the importance of a clean shirt and a shave, and so the next morning before dawn, he donned his church clothes, borrowed his father’s wedding shoes, and made the long walk over two hills and three valleys to the Hetmański family door. He knocked and waited patiently on the modest path, overgrown with weeds and muddy with the runoff from the mountain, until Pan Hetmański finally appeared at the door.

“Excuse me for bothering you so early in the morning, Pan, but I was wondering if Pan wouldn’t mind if I made some improvements to Pan’s house. For free, of course.”

“You want to make improvements to my house?”

“For free.”

“And what did you say your name was?”

“Everyone calls me the Pigeon.”

Pan Hetmański stood in his substantial nightshirt and rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “And exactly what improvements did you have in mind?”

“Well, take this path for one, it could be paved . . . and there could be a garden wall to keep out the Gypsies . . . and glass could be put in these windows . . . and a new tin roof, perhaps.”

Pan Hetmański suppressed a smirk. “For free, you say.” Another man might have been offended rather than amused, but Pan Hetmański was a highlander and not a farmer, and thus more concerned with enjoying his plot of land than with working it. Besides, there had been enough young men lurking around lately to make him aware of what the Pigeon was up to, that the request was not to work on the hut, but to work somewhere in the vicinity of his fifteen-year-old daughter, Anielica. At least this one had the decency to come to the door and offer something useful.

“And how do I know you will not make rubble of my house?”

“If you would like to see my work, I can take you to my parents’ house. I did a complete *remont* last summer.”

“And you will work for free.”

“Yes, Pan.”

“And would this have anything to do with my daughter?”

“I will leave that up to Pan. In time, of course.”

“I’m not going to help you with any of the work.”

“Of course not, Pan.”

“And if you touch her I will throw you off the mountain and let the wild boars gnaw your bones.”

“Of course, Pan.”

“*And* if you make up *stories* about touching her, I will cut out your tongue and my wife will use it as a pincushion for her embroidery needles.”

“That won’t be necessary, Pan.”

The others had been easily scared away by such talk, and as Pan Hetmański stood in the doorway scowling at the Pigeon, he regretted that he had not answered the door with a knife or an awl in his hand to appear more threatening.

“And when will you begin?”

“Now if you like. I brought a change of clothes.”

“*Now?* Good God, you *are* an eager one. Why don’t you preserve your enthusiasm until the weekend?” He smiled. “And whatever else might be propelling you.”

“Friday evening then?”

“Saturday morning,” Pan Hetmański countered, suppressing another smirk.

“We’ll see if he shows up, the young buck,” he mumbled to his wife after he had shut the door.

“I hope so. I do need a new pincushion.”

The attention given to Anielica in the past year was not entirely unexpected. Some said that Pan Hetmański had even planned for it. He had always been known as a man with big dreams born into a small village, and though he occupied himself with the modest business of sheep, he had conferred his dreams on his children. His son he had named after the great medieval king, Władysław Jagiełło, which, despite the obvious bureaucratic snafus it caused, proved to be the perfect name for a partisan when the war came. By the time his daughter was born, he had raised his aspirations to even greater heights.

The angel herself had heard the entire conversation from the corner of the main room, where she was pretending to do her embroidery.

“Who was that?” she asked her father as indifferently as she could manage.

“He calls himself the Pigeon. He says he is from one of the villages on the other side of the Napping Knight.” The Napping Knight was the optimists’ name for the Sleeping Knight, a rock formation and legend that is believed to wake in times of trouble to help the Polish people. After being thoroughly tuckered out by the Tatars, Ottomans, Turks, Cossacks, Russians, Prussians, and Swedes, however, it hadn’t risen in some time, and would, in the years of Nazi occupation, also come to be known as the Oversleeping Knight, and later, during the Soviets, the Blasted Malingering Knight.

“The Pigeon?”

“The Pigeon.”

“Is that because of his nose or the way he walks?” Indeed the Pigeon was well-endowed of nose, and his feet turned in, causing his toes to kiss with each step.

“Hopefully, it is not because of the size of his pecker,” Anielica’s mother interjected, laughing roughly. She had, in the tradition of *górale* women, become weathered by the merciless wind and snow that pounded the Tatras.

“Fortunately, he didn’t provide me with that information,” Pan Hetmański said.

“And *why* is he going to work on the house again?” Anielica asked.

“Don’t you see?” Her mother laughed. “Your father has sold you to the highest bidder.”

“Sold? What are you talking about? Don’t be ridiculous! This one is just like the others. He will give up before he even gets a chance to peep in the window.”

“You can’t see anything through the blasted greased paper anyway,” Anielica’s mother said, waving her arm in her daughter’s direction. “But that doesn’t mean that he can’t picture it all in his mind from the yard.”

Anielica went over to the window. She pulled back the edge of the greased paper and watched the figure disappear into the woods, the corners of her mouth creeping upward, cocking the bow that would eventually lodge the arrow securely in the Pigeon’s heart.

2

Golden Hands

Irena’s hands are wide and sturdy, the veins like hard roots breaking through the soil. I watch them from a stool wedged between the door and the old Singer sewing machine as she makes a plum cake. First, they contort and contract as they set up the kneading board and line the ingredients up in a row, then they hover indecisively over the board for a moment, washing themselves in the warm, yellow sunlight. They transform in midair, losing some of their bulk, fluttering like wings, and when they gather enough momentum, they swoop down and pile the flour, pressing a well into it. They grip the eggs like rocks and crack them on the side of the board. They cup the glossy yolks as the whites trickle through a mesh of fingers and into a bowl. They drop the yolks into the center of the hill of flour and knead the dough mercilessly into flakes and lumps and finally a heavy ball, the heels pressing the dough into the board, the tips of her fingers curling up around it, almost tickling it.

“I’ve never seen anyone make a cake as fast as you,” I say.

“Złote rączki,” Irena says. Golden hands.

It’s said that all Poles have them, and that this is how you know your place in life, by the ease of your hands, that whether you are born to make cakes or butcher animals, cuddle children or paint pictures, drive nails or play jazz, your hands know it before you do. Long before birth, the movements are choreographed into the tendons as they're formed.

“I think I was born without them,” I say.

“Eh? Why don't you speak normal Polish instead of that damn *góralski* Polish. I practically have to turn my ears inside out, and I still don't understand a word you're saying.” She smiles. Irena loves to tease me about being a *góralka* — a highlander — even though she was born in the mountains too.

I smile back.

Irena frowns. Over the past month, she has been trying to teach me to talk back to her like her daughter, Magda, does. Insolence is the only language she really understands.

“Anyway, all Poles have golden hands. Even *górale.* At least yours must be good at *góralskie* things — shearing sheep and plucking chickens and making cakes,” she says.

I shake my head. “Nela always chased me away from the stove.”

“Why was that?”

“She said she didn't want me to end up cooking for someone else.”

“She's right.”

Irena reaches up to the shelf above the sink and pulls down the butter mug. She swirls a knife in the water and sinks it into the damp butter. She drops a lump into the metal pan, rubbing it into pinwheels, massaging the excess into her dry skin. She picks up the ball of dough and starts pinching off pieces, flinging them into the pan.

“Irena?”

“Yes?”

“Do you remember my grandfather?”

“Only a little. But I have heard many, many stories about him. He was legendary. Killing Szwaby left and right, blowing up transports, and setting booby traps in the woods . . . bam! As accurate as a pigeon. That was during the war, when there were Nazis living in Wawel.” Irena leans over and pretends to spit on the floor, as she does whenever she has to say anything distasteful. “But they say that even after he came to Krakow, he was still fighting the Soviets in secret. They say that Pigeon Street was named after him, and that he knew the pope.” I know better than to ask which pope. In the two millennia of the Catholic Church, there has always, only, ever been one pope for us.

“So it was the Soviets who killed him?”

“Actually, when I was very little, I remember my parents thinking that he was not dead at all, that he had only been given a One-Way Ticket to the West. My mother used to say that he was probably cozied up in some sitting room in England, sipping tea with milk.”

“Do you really think so?”

Irena frowns. She sloshes the whites into a wide bowl and beats them with a spring until they are stiff, white peaks. “Now? No. After so many years? If that were the case, he would have found some way to get in touch with your grandmother. The way he loved her . . . but as far as I know . . .” She looks up at me, leaving her hands unsupervised.

“You never talked about this with your grandmother?”

“She barely talked about him at all.”

“Why not?”

“She didn’t like telling me stories with sad endings. She said she had lived all the sad endings herself so I wouldn’t have to.”

“Well, I have no problem telling sad endings, sad beginnings, or sad middles,” Irena says.

I smile.

“You miss her, don’t you?”

“Very much.”

“It will get easier,” she says with one sharp nod, and then turns back to her work. She swaps the spring for a wooden spoon and ladles the white foam onto the dough in the pan, then picks up a plum and begins tearing the flesh from the pit. The pieces of plum go into the pan along with more pinches of dough, and when she’s finished, she slides the pan into the oven and bangs the door shut. She brushes the loose flour from the wooden board into the garbage pail, stows the board alongside the refrigerator, checks on the potatoes steaming for dinner, fills the kettle, lights the stove, pulls a stool out for herself and wedges it in the narrow aisle.

“Ah,” she says, her body finally relaxing only as her backside hits the stool. “Baking for yourself is always better than baking for a husband. Remember I said that when you are chained to an ungrateful alcoholic who beats you and your screaming brats.” She laughs, throwing her head back.

“Irena, why do you say I will marry an alcoholic?”

“I am only joking. You do have jokes up in the mountains, don’t you?”

I study her face. She’s about fifty, with short, wiry hair as black as a burnt log and dark circles stamped around her eyes no matter how much sleep she gets. She has dentures already, which are the wrong size, and when she smiles they distort her lips into a maniacal grin.

“You know, my father always told me that I would never get married, that I was born with one foot on the shelf.”

Irena frowns again. “Phooh! Was that right before he declared himself the King of Persia and passed out in his own urine?”

The kettle shrieks, and she reaches over my head to pull two glasses down from the other shelf. From an empty can she keeps close to the sink, she plucks two tea bags, already brown and dried with use. Irena can squeeze five cups of tea out of a single tea bag, use a match for a week, butter two slices of bread with what others leave on the knife, and wash an entire sink full of dishes with half a liter of hot water. Her stinginess is her birthmark from the village, her impatience the blemish of the city, where she’s lived since she was five years old.

“How many do you have now anyway? Twenty-one?”

“Twenty-two.”

“On the shelf at twenty-two? Why, you have not even cracked the spine of your book yet.”

“Some people in the village consider twenty-two to be on the shelf already.”

“Some people still think that the sun revolves around the earth. What other *bzdury* did he pack into that head of yours?”

“I don’t remember anymore.”

“Good. Keep it that way.”

It’s a lie of course. When you’re a child, every word embeds itself like a splinter. Even when the skin grows over, you can still feel it somewhere underneath. He told me that I would never be beautiful, that I would end up on the shelf, a *stara panna,* an old mushroom, that I had better take the first man who shows the slightest bit of interest. And to say the truth, I have never been the Anielica of the village, as they say where I am from. In pictures, my features always huddle in the middle of my face, and my hair is so blond, my eyebrows all but disappear. My thin lips cower under my nose, and no matter what my expression and the source of light, the shadows manage to find every bump, dent, and dimple. Ever since I can remember, everyone except Nela has called me Baba Yaga, after the old witch in the fairy tale.

Irena makes up plates, and we carry them into the living room, where we eat our dinner from the coffee table. Over the month I've been living with her, the table has gradually shed its formality, first losing the table linens, then the good china, then the colored napkins. Today Irena eats with her plate balanced on her knees. She is a solid but practical cook, and the menu never changes. *Kotlet schabowy,* potatoes with parsley, cucumbers and cream, *kompot,* and tea.

“Could you pass me the remote?” Irena says.

I can smell the plums melting into the meringue. Irena flips through all the commercials and settles on a retrospective. That's all they ever show on television these days, it seems — retrospectives and commercials. Back and forth, communism and capitalism, past and future, and all we can do in the present is stare at both with disbelief.

First, all the familiar Solidarity leaders from the eighties parade by — Wałęsa, Popiełuszko, Walentynowicz, Lis, Gwiazda — followed immediately by the dancing chocolate bars and the clean-scrubbed village girls leading cows across meadows.

Irena mutes the television and sniffs at the air. She never uses a timer, but her cakes always come out perfectly browned. She stacks the dirty plates and carries them into the kitchen. There's the sound of a key scraping in the door, and my legs stiffen against the edge of the love seat.

Irena mutters something under her breath.

“What was that, *mamo*?”

Magda enters as she always does, on a raft of perfume and cigarette smoke, sweeping her arms as she walks, turning on the balls of her feet like a dancer bolted to a music box. Irena told me that it was once Magda's dream to become a ballerina, but her hips had grown out too far, and her splayed toes had rebelled against the taping of her feet. After that, she devoted herself to becoming a prosecutor, though at the moment, she is nearly failing out of her first year of law school.

“Speaking of old maids,” Irena calls from the kitchen. “You know what they say, give away the milk for free and you can’t sell the cow. Where did *you* sleep last night?”

“In paradise,” Magda says, and sighs dramatically. She drops her bag exactly where she’s standing and fingers her dark hair, which is shaped into the sleek pageboy that is popular among the university girls now. Part of me is annoyed by her, by her preening and the way that she treats Irena, and the other, fascinated by her secret girlish rituals — the bottles of makeup and nail polish in her room, the smell of spring after she’s finished showering, the heeled shoes scattered by the door. Magda always looks like she’s just stepped off the cover of an *Elle* or *Kobieta,* and I think half the reason she ignores me is because I trim my own hair and buy my clothes by the kilogram. Sometimes I catch her glancing at my rucksack and my lug-soled shoes and quickly averting her eyes, as if my belongings are giant boils or missing limbs; should she dwell on them for too long, my plainness might even be contagious.

“Put on some slippers,” Irena chides her. “I don’t need to wash these floors any more than I already do.”

“They’re new shoes. I’m trying to break them in.”

“New shoes? With whose money?”

“Żaba bought them for me.”

“That should tell you something when a boy’s name is Frog.”

“Sometimes frogs turn out to be princes.”

“And sometimes they just sit on a lily pad and ribbit all their lives. Have you been smoking?”

I sit frozen on the edge of the love seat. My entire life, I knew only one house, and I moved around it without thinking. Now, suddenly I have to worry about where I put my toothbrush in the bathroom and when I can use the washing machine and how long I can leave an empty teacup on the table without feeling bad when someone else takes it away. Across the front hall, Irena yanks at the oven door and bangs the cake pan on top of the stove. She gets out plates and forks and serves up the cake.

“Where’s my piece?” Magda asks.

“At the store. If you hurry, you can still buy one.”

“You know, *mamo,* someday you’re going to wish you treated me better.”

“Oh, please. Don’t be so dramatic. First it was lupus, then early-onset Parkinson’s, then chronic fatigue . . . any excuse not to study. *Głupia gęś,*” Irena says. Stupid goose.

“I wasn’t going to worry you, but I’m having some tests done tomorrow.”

“Really? While you’re there, why don’t you ask the doctor to fix your legs so they close?”

“Maybe it’s you who needs to go out and get yourself a little something, *mamo.* Maybe that would put you in a better mood. I’ve seen the way that Pan Guzik gives you the eye when you go out to the courtyard to feed the cats. Or what about Stash? He always had a thing for you.”

“Głupia panienka,” Irena says. “I hope you don’t think what you’re getting from that frog-boy qualifies as a *little something*.”

“You’re right. I wouldn’t call it *little* at all.”

“Bezczelna,” Irena mutters.

Their constant bickering makes me nervous, like a storm gathering beneath my feet. Sometimes I want to jump up and tell them to stop, stop before it’s too late, but I know that between mothers and daughters it’s never that simple. I sit on the love seat, keeping one eye on the kitchen and one on the television. There’s some grainy footage of protesters being sprayed by fire hoses on the Rynek, and the way the camera bounces and tilts, I can imagine the person trying to keep it hidden under his coat, running away when the hoses turn on him. In the kitchen, Magda helps herself to a piece of cake from the pan, dribbling crumbs on the floor.

“Clean that up,” Irena snaps.

Instead, Magda snatches a plate from the shelf and heads to her room. She looks over and sees me sitting in the living room in front of the mute television, and furrows her eyebrows at me. She bangs the door of her room shut behind her, and the plastic panel rattles in the frame.

“And don’t bang the door,” Irena calls after her. Irena comes into the living room carrying two plates of cake and sets one down on the coffee table in front of me.

"Bezczelna," she mutters. "Trying to tell that girl anything is like throwing beans against the wall."

She picks up the remote and turns up the volume, and for the rest of the afternoon, the monotone voice of the retrospective competes with the rock oompah of Goran Bregović coming from the other side of the flat.