

Paweł Sylwester Więzik

**WHEN
MOUNTAINS
SCREAM**

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MOUNTAINS
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Translated from the Polish by

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Szczyrk 2023

I dedicate this novel to my wife Magdalena.

Thanks to you, demons keep their distance.

Act 1





CHAPTER 1

THE SINNERS' DANCE

"You do realize that if we have an accident, you'll end up killing both yourself and our child?!" Matt Flis said to his wife Magdalena, who was right then resting a foot on the dashboard of their silver Peugeot 307 CC, lazily watching the landscapes passing by as they drove on towards their holiday destination. Matt hated it when she lounged about like that, but Magda was feeling too comfortable to react, so he ranted on, "I heard about some guy whose shin bone pierced his lungs when he crashed his car. They talked about it on some breakfast TV show, to make people think..."

Matt clearly had no intention of shutting up and insisted on keeping the conversation going, one neither Magda nor her massively swollen, eight-month old tummy were interested in. As if to confirm this, their son Milosz (if the USG scans were accurate in showing what sex their unborn child was to be) kicked Magda in the ribs with all the strength the little one had in him.

"Can you hand me the water? Seems Milosz is not happy about us driving with the roof down," she asked.

"There you go." Her husband handed over a plastic bottle of naturally sparkling highland water and Magda took a long sip. The guy at the petrol station who'd sold it to them was right, she thought -

the locally sourced springwater really did taste delicious, so much nicer than tap water back in the big city, especially when nicely chilled.

"You gonna take your foot off the dashboard, or do we have to argue about it?" Matt now insisted.

"I'm pregnant, so lay off!"

This excuse was something she had grown used to using of late, any time they both knew she was in the wrong. The power of this single argument left him helpless and closed the gates to all disputes, pleas or complaints. She did of course use it on purpose and knew it was her best card to play. It was a ploy which worked each time, though there were moments when she needed to apply a little weeping in order to make her position even more convincing. A pregnant wife in fits of tears was an answer to all the complex dilemmas any man could ever face and a perfect cure to all relationship problems. Magda did sometimes wonder what would happen once the baby was born and one more little car crash would no longer be easily explained through hormonal imbalances and emotional turmoil caused by the pregnancy. For the time being, this worked, but once the eight month old belly became nine months old and then went back to being its usual size, she would have to admit that instead of watching the road ahead she was checking her phone and looking up gossip websites. The child would be too small to take the blame for any more mishaps, and so the conflict-free relationship based on the rule of "I'm pregnant, OK?" would end.

"What's so amusing?" Matt asked, forcing her to focus on him again.

"I'm just smiling and thinking about how much I love you, you know," she answered, putting her hand on the nape of his neck.

"The traffic jam before Szczyrk is nothing unusual. When I came here for a skiing holiday it went all the way back to Buczkowice, and so today we're in luck."

As if to confirm this was true, they stopped just after a roundabout in Buczkowice, seeing a line of cars before them stretching in the direction of Szczyrk, a pretty little town dubbed the "Silesian Pearl of the Beskidy Highland Range".

"I read somewhere that they're planning to tunnel through the mountains, from Brenna or somewhere nearby, but knowing how slow all these contracts and construction work take to conclude, it won't happen... If we could take the highway straight there, we wouldn't have these problems!"

Magda looked at her irritated hubby, adjusted the sunglasses on her nose and reached into her backpack. She took out two filled bread rolls wrapped in plastic foil and handed one to Matt.

"Have a steak sandwich, darling, you're becoming a bore," she joked.

"Don't mind if I do. We have about a mile to go, won't take half hour," he said, chuckling bitterly.

"It's no different anywhere else. Matt, think, if we'd chosen Zakopane or Wisla, would we not be stuck in traffic there too?"

"You know I hate Zakopane, so forget that argument! Krupowki High Street now chock full of stalls selling Chinese plastic pap. And there's always too many crowds where too much shit is on sale!" he answered in a flash and made her burst out laughing.

She got as close to him as the gear shift stick allowed and whispered in his ear,

"I promise you'll never forget this holiday. As soon as we get to the hotel, we'll go see if the beds are as big as the Konfederatka website promised."

* * *

Once they got to their destination, they found a snow-white walled mansion with a red tiled roof poking steeply into the sky. Magda instantly realized it had to have been recently renovated, seeing as the facade was spotless and the fencing around the property perfectly even. A cute little alleyway led up to the front door, lined with rose bushes and two white-black lanterns framing the entrance.

"This place looks magical!" she cried and tugged at the small gate which led towards the gardens.

"Watch out for the dog," Matt warned, as he struggled to get their luggage out of the Peugeot's tiny trunk.

“Relax! There’s no sign warning of any...”

Magda was interrupted by the sound of barking coming from the back of the garden and so she took an instant step back towards the gate.

“Everything alright, babe?!” Matt asked, carrying a blue suitcase which contained most of the stuff they had brought along with them.

“What a cutie!” she howled with glee as a Labrador pup ran out from behind a flowering bush and began licking her hands hungrily.

“I hope it doesn’t have any fleas,” Matt groaned and circled the animal cautiously.

“Stop it, darling... He’s so cute!”

Magda didn’t care one bit what her hubby thought. Any time talk turned to canine things, he became a moaning, relentless critic. His dislike of all animals was so vast she could almost see him hosting his own television show – like the opposite of some BBC wildlife series, only in Matt’s case featuring him riding round some rancho with a shotgun, killing anything that moved. Filling the TV studio with trophies he’d bring back from his hunts...

“Today, welcome to Szczyrk and the garden of a certain picturesque hotel where you can find a flea ridden mutt roaming the gardens. Keep well away! Now back to the studio, this is Matt George Flis, over and out!”

Magda was quietly amused by this fantasy, but decided not to share her amusement with her spouse – not everyone had to like sweet, little puppies, wasn’t it so?

“Magda, you coming? And wash your hands right now. Who the hell knows where that mutt has...”

Dressed in a pair of short pants a’la Jim Carrey in Ace Ventura Pet Detective, Matt was already up on the porch of the hotel mansion, saying hello to the lady of the house.

“Did you come from far away? How was your journey?” the middle-aged woman asked with a smile and waved them indoors.

“Yes, not too bad, thank you,” Matt answered and brought their suitcase inside. “We got stuck in traffic back at the roundabout, but then I hear that’s normal.”

The woman smiled as if to show she agreed and Magda realized she reminded her of her auntie Aniela. She had the same gleam in her

eyes, a look of curiosity, something she associated with her mother's sister and the visits she'd pay the family home in Pruszewo. It was a friendly sort of gaze, but penetrating too, and quick to question, to probe, like some host on a TV quiz show, hungry for answers.

"Do you smoke, by the way?" the woman asked. "Not that I mind, but I have to tell you the house is over 100 years old and there is no smoking at all allowed inside."

"I don't smoke, and my wife is pregnant so nothing to worry about there."

"Is this house really that old?" Magda enquired, surprised as she went through the door and then onto the verandah the other side of the hallway.

"It was renovated recently. Eh, there's always something more to fix, though... You finish on one side and then the other starts crumbling. Round and round!"

The woman opened the door which led upstairs and handed them a small key attached to an orange key fob.

"Leave your shoes downstairs, so dirt doesn't get around. Here is the front door key and do try not to lose it... Once unpacked, come down so we can sign you in!"

"Of course. My hubby will be down in a second, while we have a lie down. I think little Milosz did not really enjoy driving down here with the roof down and needs a nap."

"If you need anything, all you need to do is knock on the partition," the owner said as she turned to walk towards the glass wall of the verandah which clearly led to the living quarters of *Konfederatka*.

"Quite a nice place, right?" Matt asked, whispering for effect. She nodded and began climbing the awfully creaky stairs which led up to their room, feeling like nothing now could possibly ruin her mood.

* * *

As Magda Flis lay back on the wonderfully comfy mattress, imagining all the wonderful evenings awaiting them in the town of Szczyrk, a couple of miles away inspector Alexander Dunaj was just finishing his second glass of scotch on ice. This particular brand was

not too expensive, but the taste put a rich smile on his face as he absorbed himself in the aroma and flavours emanating from his chilled glass. His friend, Chubby Dave, liked saying that drinking whisky was an almost sacred ritual and after thirty odd years of worshipping at the altar of all sorts of alcohol, Alex Dunaj could agree.

“Oh, that feeling as if Jesus himself was blessing my palate... The son of god dancing all around my tongue!” Chubby Dave would say any time they met in the evenings in his garden on Highland Street and even though the line had become a sort of mantra Dunaj always burst out laughing, as if it was the first time he was hearing it.

“Hello, boss! I got some news for you!” he now heard a voice shouting the other side of his office door. Dunaj hid the glass in the lower drawer of his work desk, just as officer Anthony Przybyla burst into his office. Ant was one of the younger faces at the station, and belonged to a new generation of lawmen the commissioner liked calling his “young wolves,” while Dunaj preferred calling them,

“My pups! How you doing, Ant? What’s new round town? Sex, drugs, kidnappings?” the inspector asked, frowning to make himself look less amused and more business like.

“Stop with the pups! I know I’m new round here, but boss...”

“Young guns are young guns, call yourselves what you will. Have you concluded your patrol of our village yet?” Dunaj asked, getting up out his chair to look out the office window.

“Duty calls, indeed,” the young cadet answered and glanced behind the desk at the whisky bottle standing on the floor behind it. “I thought you were working the night shift.”

Dunaj was now focused on one of his young pups who was standing in the car park beneath his window, resting against his patrol car and clearly waiting to end his shift and go home. Dunaj was sure the kid was ready to go home, change into skintight pants and sing some Justin Bieber songs, just to make all the old boys at the station laugh... ‘The future of the Polish police force for fuck’s sake,’ Dunaj thought to himself, then turned to look at his subordinate who began his report,

“OK, we had two calls come through and went out to investigate. What do you want to hear first?”

“Best start at the beginning.”

"First then, we had a call from Posrednia at the Maliniak place. Someone it seems tried to break in last night and only legged it when they set the dogs on them," officer Przybyla reported.

"Did you visit the crime scene? Establish any leads?" the inspector demanded to know.

"The lock in the back door was broken, but nothing had been taken. I wrote up the report and we'll be working on the case as of Monday. Could be linked to other burglaries, maybe a local crew or out of town thieves."

"Yeah, a professional crew of bandits, just like our army back in 1939," inspector Dunaj grumbled. "I will ask three questions which should help you solve this puzzle before Friday night entertainments begin. Ready?"

"Oh, boss, I'm in no mood for your games..."

"Ready or not?!"

"Ready, chief..." the young cadet sighed.

"Fine. Good boy. First of all - who called it in?"

"Mrs Hanna Maliniak, 78 years of age, lives at..." Przybyla read out from the report in his hand, looking for the relevant details.

"Grand! Mrs Maliniak is well known to our officers who regularly have to attend her family's property as a result of alcohol fuelled excesses they get up to all too often. All sorts of locals call to complain about what that lot get up to, including our local town councillor Kaliciak."

"I've not been working here long enough to know this yet. Boss, can we move on?"

The inspector smelled fear and tiredness on his young subordinate, which only fuelled his whisky aroused ego. He had already made up his mind to give this young pup a lesson he would not soon forget. And not just because the inspector was annoyed to be dragged away from his bottle of Grants, longing to taste its bitter kiss on the back of his throat.

"Question number two. When you got there, what was Ziggy Maliniak up to?"

"You mean the old fellow? Oh, he was asleep. The old lady said he was very tired."

“As pissed as a fart, I suspect!” Inspector Dunaj roared, slamming his fist on his desk. “Sleeping off another binge, his hungover wife conducting the investigation with you.”

“Even if it looks odd, there were signs of a break in, especially the forced entrance and bust up door frame...”

“That broken door and beat up doorframe were lying on the inside of the building or on the verandah?” Dunaj asked as fast and deadly as machine gunfire.

The young cadet’s face became puzzled, then evidently irritated. It was now dawning on him he had been a victim of a call out which involved a waste of police time and resources and no real crimes.

“They were piled up outside the front entrance,” the young cop said, hanging his head.

“Bingo, cadet! Crime solved! Case busted! That Ziggy and his all night drinking sessions, this time ended badly for their front door. Something I bet he broke trying to get out to relieve his bladder in the middle of the night. And our young guns, our future police force stars, sentenced the guilty party to six hours of sleep and more fresh glasses of vodka! Another win for our station and the local police force!”

The awkward silence which descended upon the room was disturbed only by the sound of a wall clock ticking away. The two men faced off like gunslingers in an old cowboy movie, the air between them shimmering with tension. They stood there for some time before Dunaj burst out laughing and said,

“You should have seen your face, boy! You looked as if someone had just told you you’d been fathered by two unmarried drag queens! Quite a laugh...” the inspector surmised, collapsing in fits of laughter.

The young cadet relaxed and smiled eventually. The mood in the inspector’s office lightened and the inspector himself thought it was time he did a better job of communicating with his trainee officers. He was sure his sense of humour was going to have one young pup in tears, running to mummy, soon (he could hear the other young gun outside whistling pop tunes to himself), though he was going to have to ensure they learned the tricks of the trade before he was due to retire from the force soon enough.

"You'll need a while longer to learn all about this town and its secrets, especially who to take seriously and whom to ignore. OK? People love telling tall tales, and your job is to check if they are being honest or if there's not a grain of truth in the crap they call through to our desk," Dunaj explained, keeping his voice now low and measured. "As to the other thing you mentioned, assuming we're done cracking the first case of the burglary that never was?"

"We talked to the Dubiel family on Heather Street," cadet Przybyla reported, his voice a little more steady now. "They claim their son Tom vanished the previous night. The kid is sixteen years old and I bet is out camping somewhere, smoking a joint, but the mother is totally freaked out, so we promised to search for him."

"You sure it's Tom we're after?" Dunaj asked, looking a little concerned. "He went to elementary school with my daughter, and he's a good boy as far as I know, never got into any trouble."

"Kids grow up, change, do all sorts of dumb things," Przybyla commented.

"Speaking from personal experience, most recent too, I imagine," Dunaj said and smiled a vicious smile. "Go file your reports and get going. I will go speak to some folks around town, see what I can find out. Get some rest."

"Thanks boss, see you later."

The young cadet shook his boss' hand and turned to start for the door. Before exiting the office, he turned to say,

"You know what else?"

"No, what?"

"We really are doing our best to become the best cops we can be... I hope you can see and appreciate this effort."

"Sure, kid! Part of the learning journey is getting used to my sense of humour. Is that clear? Now, one more thing..."

"Yes?"

"Let your cop partner whistling outside know they just delivered some new pink fashions to Luiza's second hand clothing emporium on the high street."

"You what?"

"Pink will go well with his skinny jeans."

On the first night of their stay in Szczyrk, Magda and Matt headed for the centre of town to have a look around and grab a bite to eat. Matt instantly noticed that the place had changed a great deal since the previous year. More and more souvenir stands were set up in the streets, as well as brand new eateries opening up on Beskidy Street. And yet, something of its original charm and natural quality remained – something unlike other holiday destinations around the country. “Naturally native” is how Matt liked calling it in his mind, for it sounded nice and said what he needed it to say.

Yeah, the town had changed a lot and become more modern, more cosmopolitan even over the years, but it still had that unique, provincial charm about it. This rural sort of mentality could be felt in the way people interacted with each other, something out of town visitors could pick up on straight away. Fancy hotels and restaurants had not completely taken over from places where you could pay for your drinks the next day and where everyone knew each other not just by sight but by name also. Matt really liked and needed to feel this sort of small town warmth, long gone from the loud and rough streets of Warsaw. He could remember the name of the man who ran ACE, a small pub in town, whereas he never knew the names of his neighbours or those who ran local shops in suburban Warsaw. And where else could one stop in the street to buy some smoked cheese made from sheep’s milk and gossip with local street traders?

“Can we finally grab a bite to eat, darling? I think Milosz and his momma need nutrition,” Magda asked, making her eyes all big and wide and pleading in a voice an octave or two higher.

“Almost there, darling. I told you I want some lamb, at this one place I’ve known for years and really need to see again,” he said smiling.

“I only wanted to remind you there are now three of us to consider. Your son clearly wanted a hamburger or a strawberry milkshake four restaurants back...”

Matt liked bickering with his wife, especially when as now she seemed to be in high spirits and fine mood. Not only that, but she really was pretty too...

“Just hang on. Tell the little one we’re here.”

Matt raised his hand, looking at his wife’s belly, and pointed at a bar with the word ACE hanging over the door. It was a small building, covered in wood panelling which made it look like a traditional highland tavern. A handful of people were sitting outside on long, wooden benches, while a wood-fired grill belched clouds of white smoke out through a chimney in the middle of the building.

“Real aces stuff their faces right here, my dear,” he recited and they went inside.

* * *

Inspector Dunaj turned his attention to a couple of tourists walking past as he drove along the street and noticed the young woman had an attractive behind. It was only once the new arrivals turned into a tavern did he realize she was heavily pregnant.

“Lucky man,” he said to himself and turned down the radio, a Dawid Podsiadlo song about waves “floating by and by and by” playing once more that day.

“All the waves gone by because we’re in the highlands, Dawid, and there’s no boats either although Red Fred looks like a storm is about to sweep him off his feet!”

A man with bright red hair, and an equally fiery temper, was clearly struggling to keep walking in a straight line as he passed by along the pavement. Known all over town for his love of booze, the drunk spent whole days going from one beer can to another without going very far at all, especially not when taking regular naps. The boys back at the station called him “Lagerman” and inspector Dunaj realized there really was something heroic about how much alcohol the man could consume each and every day of his life. As soon as he was able to beg a few coins out of unsuspecting tourists, he’d be off in search of the nearest store which could sell him a can of some superstrong brew. Considering how many tourists were around in high season, Dunaj imagined that begging could net Red Fred a larger income than an ordinary cop working hard most days of the week.

He parked the patrol car outside a souvenir store and exited.

“Hello! Earth to Red, Red Fred!” he called out in the direction of the swaying drunk. The red haired man reacted with his head, but the rest of him failed to adjust for the direction the voice was coming from and Fred fell against a statue which stood in the very center of St Jacob’s Square.

“Be cool, Fred!” Dunaj shouted and ran up to help keep the drunk from falling down. “Can you stand by yourself?”

Lagerman mumbled something which sounded like agreement, then burped loud enough to make the policeman wince.

“Do you ever eat anything, Fred? Or only drink from morning to night time?”

“Well... Buy me... Something... To eat...”

“Oh, I pity that cute wife of yours. Bet you’ve spent all the money you had on booze, huh? I should take you down to the drying out tank, but what good is it putting you in a cell again? Your old woman would only worry.”

“Give me... A bread roll... Alex?” Red asked, being escorted by the inspector to the nearest bench.

“Sure, you fool. Just sit here and don’t move, you bloody piss head.”

“Alright...”

The Mill Tavern was the nearest one to the town square, so Dunaj went inside to order two portions of fries and a cup of tea. The young woman behind the counter took his order and then gave it to the boys in the kitchen.

“Take away, ok?” he mentioned, then waited to pick up a plastic tray covered with deep-fried potatoes, covered in ketchup, then grabbed a paper cup filled with raspberry flavoured tea with his free hand and went outside.

“Special delivery for Red Fred, eat up, you bugger,” he growled, approaching the man waiting for him on the bench.

Fred was already curled up in a foetal position, snoring away and emitting a stink which was a mix of sweat, booze and piss – enough to spin the inspector’s head.

“Wake up, you bum!”

The cop shoved the drunk aside and sat down on the bench next to him as the drunken man came to and sat up.

"Fank you, Al, you a star... Top cop, and all that..."

Fred grabbed a handful of fries from the plastic plate and covered his face in ketchup wolfing them down in an instant. Half the fries ended up in his lap and down by his feet, but the ones which hit the mark clearly pleased the hungry wino.

"You gonna sit still today, or are we gonna have to take a little trip, Fred?" Dunaj asked, once the other man was sipping on the tea.

"Gotta get home, Al, but if I all alone... Home, alone, it rhymes, right? I got talent, man."

"You know what rhymes? Booze and the blues? You sip, I whip? You drink, end up in the clink?" Dunaj barked and took out a cigarette. "So if you don't want to cause me any more trouble, get home right now and go to sleep and say night night to good old Beata before you do..."

"Al, Alex, man, please... She's gone off again, don't know where!" Fred pleaded, seemingly embarrassed by the confession.

"You drink, she leaves, that's how it is with men and women! I don't want to see you round town no more today, Fred, and don't make me take you down to the station, just for old times' sake."

The old times were long gone... Times when Dunaj, Red and Starling were a team. Three friends from school, always hanging out and having fun, before things moved on and they went their separate ways. Dunaj studied criminal reform and offender management at a college in Lublin, then moved to the east part of Poland where he joined the uniformed corps. Starling kept his old nickname when he became a chef in a restaurant in Bielsko Biala, but then developed a tumour and died. As for Red...

Red only had the one love he always stayed true to and that was the bottle. Then another friend from the old days joined in that union - Beata, who for reasons never quite grasped by inspector Dunaj decided to marry Red and even give the wastrel a son. When in 2008, Alexander Dunaj decided to end his roaming days and settle back in his home town, his old pal Red looked like death warmed up and pretty little Beata had turned into a miserable looking Cinderella. A story suffered by so many in that particular part of the world, but sad all the same. Small town life, highland hardships and so on and on...

"Do I need to drive you or can you walk on your own?" Alex asked, seeing his old pal getting to his feet.

"Better... Feeling better. Officer... Thanks for the meal."

"Don't take the piss, Fred. Don't make an old pal mad!"

"I'm going. Relax..."

Red turned away without another word and set off in the direction of the high street. If he could walk straight and extend his back he would look not much different to the young friend inspector Dunaj could still remember from their school days.

"Fred!" he shouted out and the slouching man paused, then turned round slowly.

"What is it?"

"You hang around town all day long, maybe you can help me with something... Listen, a kid's gone missing. Tom Dubiel."

"Joseph's boy, from Heather Street?"

"Correct. You didn't happen to see him last night or maybe later? Today? His folks are worried sick, he went missing last night."

Red stopped, smiled and pointed to what few teeth remained in his mouth.

"Maybe he listens to whispers, who knows... Whispers sometimes muddy waters."

"Fred, I'm asking seriously. Come on!"

"Oh, but the problem is that you don't know how to listen, Al. You never done! You can't hear people screaming, what then if they whisper, eh?"

"You see Tom around town, you call me. Right away... And drink less else you'll not last long."

Dunaj got up off the bench and headed back to his patrol car. Sick of what was turning into a crazy little conversation.

"Dunaj! Listen! You don't know! How to listen! Right! You never fucking did!"

Dunaj did not turn around before leaping into his car and driving away, so as not to see his old pal sliding into the abyss....

"I tell you all! If they fall silent, the stones will scream! Hear me, cop?! Dunaj!" Red roared, frothing at the mouth.