

DANUTA AWOLUSI

NEW LIFE OF SARAH

Chapter 1

Every day before dawn, I am greeted by the bare walls of my flat. Their white colour has lost its shine, the paint has turned grey. Even though it's only five in the morning, I find it easy to get up from the folding sofa pretending to have been a comfortable bed for almost sixteen years. I am waiting for it to fall apart but the bloody thing seems to be indestructible. Just like me.

I sleep badly. When I happen to fall into deeper sleep, I have nightmares that keep me from coming around. That is why I prefer the "standby mode" which my body tolerates surprisingly well, resisting my self-destructive attempts, as if I had been made of a titanium shell and my insides were cast of stainless steel.

There is hardly any furniture in the small living room. Just that sofa (I never bother to make it tidy), a table that I once found in a skip, and an apple crate turned into a stand for an old-fashioned television. In the corner, I have put a portable wardrobe made of fabric. You can zip down its walls. All my clothes will fit into it and, quite honestly, I have very few of those.

Because I don't have any other furniture, the room appears large. Sounds echo around the walls. The flat seems to be waiting for a general renovation or new tenants. And yet it is not abandoned, I live in it. Unattached to anyone or anything. An ascetic, a lover of morbid minimalism. Still convinced that she needs more time to think where to live and how to settle down in her new life. Except the life is not new. And I'm not new. Or very young.

By the front door there is a tiny kitchenette. It is so miniature that there is no chance of putting in a stove or oven. It doesn't matter, I never cook.

I'm going to have a nasty day today.

I wash, then I open the hotel mini-bar-sized fridge and reach for the milk. I put sweet cornflakes into the bowl. They're heavily processed and fucking unhealthy, but who cares? It was a success story when I learned to have breakfast.

In the cupboard left by the previous tenants, I keep one plate and one mug. There is an enamelled sink sitting in the kitchen counter, and next to it a microwave oven, the only device providing me with hot meals. I bless the supermarkets selling ready meals. If not for those, I would probably die of malnutrition. Not of hunger, I have practically never been hungry since that event, that is since day X, my private apocalypse which I shouldn't have survived.

So much about the flat. I occupy a bedsit with a bathroom and a kitchenette. A deserted space, an opposite of a home. I refer to it as a cavern or a cave. I am like an animal that hides in a cave and crawls out only when it has to.

My mother made me crawl out once.

She had been calling every day since I moved. I had the phone installed just to keep in touch with her. She didn't deserve to be rejected.

"Sarah, find something to do. Please," she kept insisting when I bought this dump ten years ago.

"Mom, you're at it again. Giving me instructions."

She sighed heavily. It was so poignant that she got my attention.

"I'm moving to a retirement home," I heard.

"Why?"

"What do you think? I'm alone. Still healthy, but it's only a matter of time. I am selling the apartment and I will live there. They offer good conditions."

"If that's what you want."

"I only want one thing. I want my daughter to try and stick her nose out of this dump once in a while."

"It's a cavern."

My mother never visited me. We haven't seen each other in years.

“What about I leave you alone and you come up with something sensible. Whatever.” She could really get her way.

“Are we finally burying the hatchet?”

“I am not going to go over it again. Or insist. Ask how you are. And give you advice.”

On that day, I left the house to get some air and think about my mother’s words. The town is small, a lot of single-family houses, a few low blocks of flats like mine. Plus an elementary, a secondary school, a public library, a fire station, an outpatient clinic and a post office. Plus three places where you can get a drink. One is a slummy establishment where the locals succumb to alcoholism and run away from problems. The second is a pizzeria also serving fast-food. Families drop by for lunch or dinner. I sometimes order something to go from them myself.

The third place is a cafe and bistro called Chill & Grill. At the time, it had only just opened, was new to the town, a twenty minute walk from my cavern. There was a note on the door: “Staff needed”. I didn’t think anyone would hire me. I suppose I looked scary, I was skinny and had sunken cheeks – an embodiment of anti-ad for any services or products. Well, unless you advertised slimming pills for anorectics.

I went inside. I met the eyes of the owner, a tall, bearded, and broad-shouldered man. He was about two meters tall and as big as a tree. Mick smiled understandingly right at the moment he saw me. He immediately offered me a part-time job, as if he had been waiting for me.

Instead of an interview, he asked one question:

“Alcohol? Drugs? What are you trying to leave behind?”

“Death,” I replied indifferently.

Death took everything I had, and then forgot about me.

Chapter 2

I walk to work. In this town there are no long distances, there are only two bus stops. For the sole purpose of commuting to larger cities. They are most often occupied by secondary school kids when they dream of going shopping. There are no clothes shops (except a supermarket) in the town, and certainly no boutiques with trendy outfits.

I get to the main street quickly. I pass grocery stores, a bakery, a mini-market. It's cold and I'm only wearing a cotton shirt and trousers. I'm shivering, but my brain doesn't tell me that I should perhaps wear something warmer.

Today is one of those days. One of the two dates in a year that overwhelm me with the power of memories. I wanted to take time off, but Mick wouldn't let me. He knows what an anniversary means and said if I didn't show up for work, he would call the police and ram my apartment door.

I believe him. He has been running AA meetings for twenty years, and must have done much more crazy stuff.

He, in turn, believes me.

I never told anyone what happened. Nobody in this town knows. Mick took a stand gracefully, knowing how to get me to open up, just to look under the hood, not to cause any harm, and then to close me down.

"I need to know the truth," he said after my first month at work.

"It's a private matter."

"You sometimes drift away. You are absent. And impolite to the guests. If I'm going to keep you here, I want to know what's going on. No details. Just for the sake of clarity."

It was after Chill & Grill had closed. I polished the tables, the floor, counted the money in the till, washed the coffee machine and prepared mugs and cups for the next day.

"My child ... My son ..."

It's been a long time since I said it out loud. Actually, those words never left my mouth. My husband notified everyone about Alan's death. My ex-husband. He called his mother, his parents, the whole family. He made the information public. He notified the school, as well as all my patients and the clinic where I saw them. He then organized the funeral when Alan's

body was finally released. And I didn't say anything at the time. I plunged into hollow repression, immersed in a thick and sticky liquid. Anaesthesia flooded my brain, a wave of dementia paralyzed my heart. Everyone said I was in shock but that word didn't describe my condition. It was like having a stroke. A serious stroke which turned me into a plant. Unfortunately, it was bound to pass. I knew that when I come round after that waking coma, I would be in pain no one was conceivably ready for.

“My son died in an accident. He was our only child. He was seventeen. Soon after, I divorced my husband. I sold the house. And I came here. I can't cope with anything or anyone. I am a walking trauma. A living dead. You can fire me because I will most likely never be nice to those high school jokers. They don't give a shit anyway.”

Until lunchtime, secondary students are our only customers. They order grilled cheese and ham sandwiches, chocolate shakes or cocktails. In the afternoon, we get amorous couples, parents with children and senior citizens. They go for coffee and cake because we always have pastries to choose from. The sweets are baked for us by a local patisserie. Chill & Grill has a very simple menu. Apart from sandwiches, we only serve soup of the day. Still, the food is hearty and prepared with care. Greta, who works in the kitchen, puts a world of goodness between the slices of wheat bread. You can eat for very little, and it is not junk food. I always refuse to eat, but they force soup on me anyway. When Greta notices that the plate is intact, she tells Mick on me.

“Nobody's going to fire anyone. Thanks for sharing. Honestly, I was betting on bad habits, but that's probably worse.”

He hasn't been drinking for years. He was one of those who crawled ashore and caught the others so they could get out too. There are AA meetings in three cities nearby.

“I'm addicted, Mick, you know the feeling. I try to kill myself with an unhealthy lifestyle but sadly it doesn't work.”

“Well, all right. So you want more work?”

“Why not. Does it mean I'm not that bad after all?”

“You know how to work the till and you are fast, that's something.”

Two years passed before I began to feel comfortable with them. For two years I hardly spoke to Greta. I only talked to Mick about the business (Order coffee. Vegetables. Extras. Cleaning products). And, anyway, it felt like I was having philosophical debates with him every day.

But today I'm going to cut myself off. Because today is my child's birthday, and once again I want to summon the courage to leave this world.

When I open the Chill & Grill door, I feel something is going to happen.

I am expecting the worst.

Chapter 3

I'm not sure Greta knows. I suppose Mick hasn't told her. This guy knows how to be discreet. He is a natural protector. If you believe that nothing happens by chance, I'll tell you that I met Mick so that I could pull myself together, at least in bits and pieces. Put a few blocks back in place and start to function as a member of the society.

Before that, I stayed in my flat for seven years staring at the ceiling. I only took phone calls from my mother and ordered takeaways. Good job that this stage is behind me. I don't know how those years passed. They flew so fast I feel I had been sleeping for seven years. They didn't leave me unscathed, though. I still feel like I'm hollowed out from the inside. Empty, meaningless.

The day Alan died, I died with him. A new Sarah took over. A stranger deprived of many features that I liked about myself. This new Sarah had a series of failures in many fields, but was able to make decisions. She made lightning-fast cuts, and in no time hacked off all her old life like an infected leg. She moved me to a provincial town. Although I have been living here for more than a decade and meeting the locals every day, I still don't know anyone. I don't remember names and faces. A dumb schoolgirl made me realize that one day. She had green eyeshadow on her lids and heavily mascaraed lashes.

“What's it going to be?”

The girl gave me a look of contempt. She was aloof and pissed off, probably not at me.

“What’s it going to be?” she snorts. “I’ve been your customer for a year. And I always order the same thing. How can you not remember it?”

I let a few seconds pass, burdening her with heavy silence.

“What’s it going to be?”

She hissed at me like an angry kitten.

“Vege sandwich, no mayo. And a coconut milk strawberry-banana smoothie.”

Perhaps it might be nice to recognize people, to begin relationships. But I don’t see the point.

The problem is, nothing makes sense.

Mick is here. He turned on the lights and started the espresso machine: a giant harvester that can make eight espressos at a time. The aroma of coffee always makes me feel better. Jesus, if not for this place, I would probably end up in a loony bin.

Thank you, mom, for being so relentless and making me look for a job.

“Hi,” he mumbles. „Coffee?”

I notice my hands are shaking.

“No, thanks.”

I hand over the reins to stress. I know it’s Mick’s shift today. And in fact, he’s going to do all the work for me, because I’m in such a lousy mood. He told me to come to work because he wanted to keep an eye on me. I have a feeling that I am slipping into some kind of debt but he doesn’t think so. He told me he had lost his family to alcohol and that now he needs to earn some good karma. I am only a small part of the redemption.

“I’m off to the kitchen, I’ll prep the ingredients,” I tell him.

Greta is going to be here any minute but I have to keep my hands busy.

“Better stack the display,” he stops me in a firm, fatherly tone.

He doesn't want me to handle the knives. What a great foresight. Not that I want to hurt myself. But I bet I might absentmindedly lose my finger.

“Okay.”

I stack milk cartons, add coffee beans into a large grinder, and clean the coffee machine. The first customers will be there before eight. Quite a few students and people on their way to work buy take-away breakfasts from us.

There are two huge windows at the front of Chill & Grill. You can see a small square and a fragment of a parking lot. I stare at this bleak landscape all day, I know it by heart, in all seasons of the year. It's just starting to rain which doesn't surprise me. It was me who poisoned the air today and summoned heavy clouds. Though I really shouldn't be sad. After all, this is not the day of death, it's a birthday. If Alan had been alive, he would have been thirty-four.

We might have gone to a pub to celebrate it. He, me and Eric. A small but happy family. Alan would probably work in some art gallery, organize exhibitions. Or he would work as a university lecturer? So many possibilities. Would he be with someone? Would he have children? I will never be a grandmother.

Greta comes in, no umbrella. Her coat is dripping, she emerges straight from a downpour.

“Hi! What is it with the damn weather? It wasn't supposed to rain cats and dogs,” she complains but in a cheerful tone. She is like that. There is a small radiator somewhere inside her, stopping Greta from plunging into cold despair. She is lonely and I know it bugs her.

Mick chose the team in a weird way. And at the same time he did it perfectly. Chill & Grill is our home and we genuinely care about it. We are not employees but part of a twisted family.

My workstation is now ready for the day. Normally, I would go to the back room with them and watch them eat breakfast. Today, however, I stay at the front. I am numb and have no idea how I am going to make it through the day and survive the evening. In my mind, I scroll scenes from Alan's birthdays. Blowing the candles, presents. When he went to secondary school, we stopped throwing parties for his friends. There were fewer of them than in primary school, Alan chose his friends with care. I wasn't worried about it. Emotional intelligence was my son's strong side. He was mature, a little above his friends age. He could show affection, so we understood each other perfectly.

So why did this happen?

The first wave of guests in the morning passes by. Mick is serving the customers, and I just brew coffee. Normally I do everything and Mick disappears to run his errands. Unless Greta has a day off, he takes over the kitchen. Today, however, it is better for me not to approach people. My eyes are filled with such despair that the customers might suspect me of bad intentions. Who keeps an employee in that state of mind?

I don't even know when the time passed, it's already noon. The place is almost empty, except for a girl who seems to be writing a novel and has already ordered a second cup of coffee.

Mick is at the back talking to Greta, and I hear the door open. Someone is folding an umbrella, but I don't look up. By force of habit, I position myself behind the counter to ask "What's it going to be?" I never try to be polite, smile or show a hint of good will. Standoffishness has become one of my chief features.

"Good afternoon."

A boy's voice. A secondary school student, no doubt. I don't answer. Where is Mick?

"Could you replace ham with cheese? I would like four slices of cheese. And instead of mayonnaise, could I possibly have peanut butter and jam?"

I freeze. My body begins to pulsate with warmth, blood in my veins feels like a raging torrent. I have to hold on to the table top because it feels like someone has suddenly turned on the power. The surge of energy almost knocks me off my feet.

I lift my head and look him straight in the eye.

These are Alan's eyes, my son's. My son is back.

Chapter 4

Alan was an owner of beautiful hazel irises. One was brighter than the other, it was his unique imprint, like a birthmark distinguishing him from all other boys. He had chocolate brown hair with a coppery sheen. And a sprinkling of freckles on his nose. When he smiled, the right

corner of his mouth used to go up. It revealed short, straight teeth. There was a narrow gap between the front teeth. Another distinctive mark. Alan was one of a kind, I have never met anyone like him.

Apart from the boy who has just ordered a sandwich. Exactly the same kind of sandwich Alan liked.

A stranger with one iris brighter than the other, and the eyes I know better than my own.

Paralyzed by shock, I am brazenly analysing his face, fragment by fragment. I find the freckles and a shudder runs through me making the hair stand up at the back of my neck. He smiles hesitantly, a little confused by emotion betrayed on my face. And yes, the corner of the mouth goes up and the teeth ...

My son is standing in front of me, locked in the body of another young man. He is taller, with lighter curly hair. But I have no shadow of a doubt. The mother's heart would recognize him even if I hadn't found any similarities.

„Err, will there be a problem with that sandwich? If so, I will order a standard one.

Like two peas in a pod. He never wanted to cause problems. Always ready to compromise, often ready to concede.

A few seconds more and I will burst into hysterical sobs or laughter.

“I haven't seen you before here,” I utter the words and my voice is artificial.

The boy raises his eyebrows.

“Yes, we used to go to the pizzeria. But it's noisy there, and I want to do my homework. And I'm fed up with pizza. Actually, I don't like it. I prefer...”

“Pasta.”

He laughs. I know that laugh all too well. I thought I would never hear it live again. It was supposed to remain a recording in my head forever which I play back every day.

“How do you know? It's not very popular, but I have been a pasta fan since childhood. And sandwiches. So, may I order one?”

I nod, unable to speak. My throat tightens with emotion, and my jaws begin to rattle. There are tears in my eyes, I can't control the flood.

"I'll get it", I stutter. I turn on my heel and immediately I go to the back.

I stop behind the Wild West bar style swing door and lean against the wall. I stay out of Mick and Greta's sight.

A tornado passes through my body. A violent storm wreaks havoc in my mind, while heavy rain is ruthlessly beating against my dried-up emotions. Although the feeling is brutal, I find pleasure in it. For almost two decades nothing of the sort has happened inside me. The desiccated vampire smelled fresh blood, though he seemed to have been alone in the world.

I have to pull myself together somehow. If I show too much, he'll run away. And although the town is not very big, I might not find him. I give myself a while but I'm still shaking all over. Mighty forces are pressing against me. Relief, joy, but also terrible fear.

And the question: am I crazy? Have I lost my mind?

Yes, definitely, I act crazy. And that's why I immediately decide not to tell anyone. At least until I have some evidence that others can acknowledge. The problem is that there are hardly any others around. There is no one in my circles who knew Alan. So I am completely alone and I have to face the music and try to rationally assess the developments.

I take four very deep breaths. Breathing helps the body to calm down a little, though the physical response still lingers.

"Greta. We've got an order for a four decker cheese sandwich, peanut butter and jam," I yell. My voice trembles and squeaks.

"Got it!"

Before Mick gets back at the cash register, I slip back to the front. At the same time, a girl comes in. I have never seen her here before. She looks around, meets my son's eyes in another boy's body and gives him a happy smile.

"Happy Birthday!" she calls out. "Many happy returns, Casper!"

He leaps up, runs to her and kisses her tenderly on the lips.

Chapter 5

I am losing track of time and space. I mindlessly stare at them eating sandwiches, drinking shakes and chirping to each other. Alan, I mean Casper, must be head over heels in love. He is looking at the girl with adoration. I don't like her at all. She is pretty and confident, but there is something crude about her, I sense a kind of insolence. And those lips, a plum colour lipstick, totally not my style.

Not suitable for my son. He is sensitive. He needs a soul mate, not such a ...

“Sarah, do you want to join Greta?” asks Mick.

“Do I have to?”

I'm not even looking at him. He doesn't know that my son came to Chill & Grill on his birthday. He chose this place to celebrate. This is no coincidence, it is destiny. Why, for God's sake, he meets me today? Did Casper live in the town all these years and I had no clue he did?

“No, not really, but ...”

I am not listening to Mick. I automatically steer towards the lovebirds' table.

“Would you like to order anything else?”

I have barged in. The girl looks at me reproachfully, Casper looks at me with sympathy. Yes, my son has always been kind to others.

“Thank you.”. “He doesn't let go of the girl's hands. “The sandwich was delicious. Exactly what I expected.”

He looks at me a little strangely. As if he suddenly realized that he knew me from somewhere.

My heart does a few joy flips. A soothing warmth spreads through my chest. I must flutter my eyelashes to ward off emotional tears.

“You're celebrating your birthday today, are you? Which is it?”

“Seventeenth.”

Of course it is. The number suddenly makes sense. Alan perished at the age of seventeen. Seventeen years later he comes back to me, reborn. He knew I would recognize him.

My brain works better than I expected. It offers me a clever solution.

“On this occasion, the sandwich is on the house. Drop by tomorrow and you can order another one.” A moment of hesitation and a quick analysis of the situation. “You too. Any sandwich at the expense of Chill & Grill,” I say to the girl. She is still suspiciously but her features soften.

“Thank you,” says Casper “It’s a lovely gesture.”

As I return to my post, I meet Mick’s questioning gaze.

“It’s my treat,” I murmur.

He shrugs but still looks surprised.

He does not know it yet but from now on I am going to surprise him non-stop.

Chapter 6

For several years, I have been going to bed overwhelmed by a sense of pain. And not only pain.

There are things I never did after Alan passed away.

I never saw a shrink because it made no sense.

I have never taken any medications because it made no sense.

I have never fully worked through the mourning because it made no sense.

I have never attempted to start to living anew, because it made no sense.

The new Sarah made all the decisions for me, who doesn’t help me shake off my nightmares at all. I am aware that many parents experience the death of their child. And the majority, though with great difficulty, plough on. They use the help of specialists, support groups and relatives. They never forget, never stop suffering, but still, they return to the world of the living. They start new families and function with a scar in their heart. And with time, in their own way, they may even be happy.

That's what my ex-husband did.

But not me.

I plunged into darkness. I lost everything, including faith and hope. And those are driving forces making people do stuff. It turns out I didn't exist without Alan. Did he shape up my life? Did he give me an identity? How is it possible and, if so, who was I before?

I don't remember.

For the first time in ages, I am lying on the sofa, emotions spilling out inside me like a large glass of vodka drunk in one gulp. There's so much going on in my head that I'm totally stunned. My breathing is heavy, my pupils are wide, my muscles are tense.

I am not one of those people who believe in anything more than what's tangible. I am an atheist. I believe that only what we can explore and examine is true, and that the entire spiritual sphere, beliefs, and immaterial beings are simply inventions of humanity. I used to be an enthusiast of studying emotions, deep empathy. And more than once I have found out that what seems unearthly is only a projection of our fears. Thanks to our work together, my patients understood it, too.

And now? What has just happened? Has the tormented heart of the mother gone mad? Am I having hallucinations? How is Alan's birthday anniversary different from other anniversaries?

I try to imagine that it is all a delusion. The hopelessness and my attempts to self-destruction led to my mind starting to give up. If I expose myself to the world, sooner or later someone will send me to a mental hospital. It's not a bad idea, but I need to stay where I am.

After all, I just got my son back.

A word comes to mind. Reincarnation. I could subscribe to the theory of my sudden mental illness, but many people believe in reincarnation. It can't be just an invention! I make a mental note to drop into the library on a day off and read everything on this topic.

I don't have a cell phone and I don't use the Internet. I am, as I once heard on TV, digitally excluded. If I used the Internet, I would probably spend the whole night searching for research articles and publications. However, I am not under pressure to learn quickly.

I know it's Alan, full stop. And it doesn't matter if it is a religion, a culture, a theory supported or unsupported by facts. Alan's soul passed to Casper. And everything I had experienced so far led me to him.

A pitiful small town. Why did I choose this place? I found an ad for a bedsit for sale. An hour's drive from the city where we lived. I find comfort in it. I can always nip in to the cemetery if I need to. And I run a small business there that I have to check from time to time.

Eric and I bought a house. Not the top end of town, a little run down but we didn't mind. The outskirts of the city, poorly connected with the centre had its advantages. Tranquillity, unique atmosphere, low price of properties - we made the decision with good grace. A few years later, everything changed dramatically. Trendy pubs and cafes, picturesque parks, manicured lawns and flowery squares cropped up around us. A new motorway was built you could hop on and get almost anywhere in no time. The prices of houses and apartments skyrocketed, and we unexpectedly found ourselves in one of the most desirable areas. Our house and garden was worth four times what we paid for it.

When we took a decision to divorce, Eric made a strange gesture. Perhaps a touching one, or perhaps showing how lamentable I was. He left our deserted, depressive nest all to me. He said I could do whatever I wanted with the house, he didn't want a penny if I sold it. When he was in mourning he quit his old job and moved out of town because nothing kept him there. I certainly didn't.

He loved me, but he didn't want to hit rock bottom. I knew it and he did, too. He chose life. I couldn't blame him. And I didn't, because in fact I felt nothing and wasn't able to judge anyone or to feel sorry for anyone.

When Eric was really gone and I got through the first of many phases of despair, I decided to sell the house. It was too big and packed with memories. It has become a prison for me, the ultimate punishment.

I finalized the transaction efficiently. The new Sarah functioned like a robot. I gritted my teeth, knowing that when I wrap everything up, I'd hide somewhere and finally everyone would get off my back. I would be able to suffer in silence, no compassionate looks, no one waiting for me to pull myself together.

The pile of ash, however, cannot turn into something permanent again. I'm far from being a Phoenix.

I knew one thing: there was no way I would go back to any kind of work. I didn't want to see people, talk to anyone, or to pretend. Therefore, having pondered the matter, I bought two apartments. One in the city, for rent, and the bedsit in town for myself. The bedsit cost me peanuts. And no wonder. Who would like to live in such a dump on a few square metres?

The rent paid by the tenant of the apartment in the city is regularly credited to my account. I don't even notice this money. My life is so economical and minimalist that I can't even spend my salary from the bistro. Cash is of no value to me. I could lose everything and I wouldn't feel sorry for myself. The town doesn't matter either. It's just a kind of space where I exist.

Now, however, some sense is emerging from the chaos and greyness. Unexpectedly, I look at my life from a different perspective. And I still don't know if it's a dream or a miracle.

Chapter 7.

In the morning I look at myself in the mirror. I rarely do it, because the woman reflected in the glass is my enemy. I don't like confronting her. Protruding bones, like a starving child's. Concave cheeks, watery eyes. Dull hair, a miserable mousy blonde. Only the skin is perfect, without a single wrinkle, because I smile too seldom for anything to wrinkle.

I'm so skinny you might think I'm anorexic. These are genes at work, but I've lost weight since Alan's death. Well, I look terrible. I give myself bottom marks. Suddenly, the panic attacks. I grab onto the sink to wait it out. What if I scare him? What if Casper decides that this strange zombie-like woman is a threat? Yesterday I stared at him ostentatiously. I decide that I will begin to better control my reflexes. And I'll try to do something about this lamentable bodily shell.

I realize that tomorrow I have the whole day to myself. If I could chose, I'd work from Monday to Sunday but Mick disagrees. He is a good boss who does the thinking for us. He makes me take two days off a week and pays extra for overtime. He understands that Chill & Grill is my haven but will not let me cross the thin red line. Greta, too, has to follow these rules, although she could spend in all day the bistro without taking time off. We are outsiders with no private lives who don't know what to do with ourselves. We float dumb through the

days on autopilot, no joy, no fun, no life. And I must admit that we feel more cheerful together.

I put on my standard set: a shirt and jeans. There is no dress code at Chill & Grill but I always look the same. Neat, straightforward, bland. Like a clerk or receptionist in a third rate hotel. It doesn't matter what I wear, and I buy my clothes in the clothing department of large supermarkets. I never go to boutiques, I don't look at the labels. My customers probably judge me as completely tasteless. But who would I be dressing up for? Why look good when it doesn't make any sense. There is no point. Once upon a time, before Alan's death, I paid attention to my wardrobe. I tried to look smart, but also very homely. I wanted my patients to feel safe with me, to create a bond. So I chose subdued and simple, but very good quality clothing. Only a trained eye could see that every styling was really well planned.

The new Sarah has become frumpish.

I go to work with a springy step. With a new verve, unknown to me. I'm stressed out, but wild excitement is taking over. No breakfast, I couldn't force even one tablespoon of processed cereal into my mouth. I run on an empty stomach, my heart racing and my stomach cramping.

The empty spaces in me are filled with expectation. And a substitute for hope, faint, yet perceptible. I am so afraid that today will take away my illusions me and chuck me back to the land of despair. And, at the same time, I am sure that it will not happen.

I try not to analyse and not to think. It's too early for that. First, I need to enjoy what is happening. Later, when I satisfy my first hunger and gain more strength, I will decide what to do next. My son is back, he is alive. I still don't know how our fates will intertwine, how close I can be to him, but I advise myself to be very careful and put on a mask to hide my emotions.

I open the bistro because Mick is not there yet. A wave of stress is flooding over me when I enter, my hands are shaking. Is Casper going to come today? At what time? Or perhaps he will return to the pizzeria? If so, what then?

I chase away dozens of questions and set off to liven up the bistro. I turn on the light, the coffee machine, the cash register. And I look at the table where Casper was sitting yesterday.

When I realize how high my hopes are, I start to cry. Tears pour down my cheeks, bringing little relief.

Chapter 8

Mick notices I'm very nervous but he doesn't ask questions. This is one of the things I really appreciate about our relationship. He knows me well and gives me plenty of space. He allows me to be myself even though I offer him the worst possible version. He seeks the truth only as a last resort. I suppose working with alcoholics on the daily basis brought forth this angelic patience and faith in other people. My guess is she's been waiting ten years for me to come out of my shell. However, it never hints that he has any expectations or hopes.

"I'm going to arrange a new insurance for the crew today. Any preferences?" he asks at lunchtime. I can't focus. I'm not listening to what he is saying because I keep casting glancing nervous glances at the door. And as soon as I hear it swing open, I jump.

"No, Mick, it's OK," Greta replies. "I avoid doctors anyway."

She forgets the dentist runs. She has a sweet tooth, perhaps too many of those.

"Whatever. All my employees are fully insured. Just in case."

I know where it comes from. At a time when he drank heavily, he hit rock bottom. He vegetated in shitholes without any care, privileges, anything. His wife left him and took their daughters. When he had an accident, it turned out that no hospital was willing to admit him for free. He had to pay for this treatment for years. Getting out of debt wasn't easy. Yet he pulled through and became a living rock.

"Sarah? What about you?"

"Don't mind me, thank you."

„For what?"

"Thank you."

He sighs.

"I'll see what they can offer. I'll be back in the evening."

Very well. I want to be keep calm and focus only on what is important. Greta goes to the kitchen where she listens to the radio, reads books and browses the Internet during her breaks. We have several such windows during the day when the business is very slow. I spend my breaks sitting around and looking ahead.

But today I keep my eyes on the door.

Twelve o'clock. No joy. The door is empty. Nobody comes for lunch because most people commute and work outside the city. They will come for a late lunch or dinner. We are waiting for the students instead. They drop by at different times.

The girl writing the novel comes in again. She orders a coffee and heads to the booth at the end of the café. I am not curious what her narrative is about. Or why she has so much time on her hands and whether it is her job or hobby. I don't recognize her face either, I just know that she regularly spends a few hours at her laptop.

And suddenly I can see his silhouette behind the glass. My reaction is violent. Dizziness, blood pressure surge, rapid breathing.

PULL YOURSELF TOGETHER, WOMAN!

I have to mobilize all my willpower not to explode into giggles, cry or an unstoppable flow of words.

Casper smiles at me from the threshold. I return the smile and bask in this wonderful feeling. I haven't been looking forward to seeing anyone for a long time. It has been ages since my heart trembled with joy, not with fear or exhaustion.

"Good morning. May I order my favourite sandwich?"

"Good morning. Sure. Quadruple cheese, jam and peanut butter? On the house, as promised."

"Cool."

I notice a book in his hands and let out a muffled cry. I am ashamed of behaving this way. However, I bought it for him once, for his birthday. There is a film of sweat on my forehead.

"Is something the matter?" He looks at me like Alan would, with sincere interest.

"The book ... Where did you get it?"

He looks at it as if to make sure it's in the focus of my of interest.

"It's a gift from Patti."

"Patti?"

"My girlfriend. She was here yesterday with me."

I stare at it with a furrowed forehead and parted lips.

"But this book is twenty years old. It's an academic textbook."

"Do you know what it is about? He perked up. His colourful irises lit up with excitement, as they always do when he talks about art history. I mean when my son used to talk about it. Did I need more proof? How many teenagers are art history fans?!"

"Yes, I know. I... I used to sit on my shelf."

Something comes to my mind. Something so... crazy that I have to get another dizziness under control a.s.a.p.

„Patti dug it up for me at some online antiquarian bookstore," he says with pride and joy.

"She specially went to the city to pick it up."

I try not to frown. I'm not keen on Patti but I admit, the gift hit bull's eye.

"So are you going to study something related to the history of art at college?"

He nods.

„Yes. And at the same time, I want to do an internship in an art gallery.

Unexpectedly his smile fades. He remembered something. I'd love to know what, but it's not time to push on regardless.

"Could I see the book?"

He passes it to me without hesitation. I try to stop the ugly shaking of my hands.

"And sit down, please, I'll bring the order in a minute."

I grab a tattered cover and go to the staff toilet almost running. I sit on the toilet and hold back my tears. I have fallen apart like a house of cards. People might think that I am having some kind of fit.

I open the back cover.

A squeak comes out of my throat, and then a sob. I cover my mouth with my hand, afraid Greta may hear it.

For Alan. I know all your dreams will come true, my lovely boy.

I must have written the dedication eighteen years ago. Yes, I bought this book for him. And then my mother sold everything, I have no idea where or to whom. And here the book finds its way again to my son's hands.

Chapter 9

When my mother decided to sell her apartment and move to the retirement home, I was relieved to hear the news. I certainly didn't have the strength to keep her company and then look after her.

"Sarah, I need to empty the basement," she said on the phone one day."

"And ...?"

"There is stuff."

Stuff from my house. Alan's stuff. I only took a few photos with me and all the rest went to my mother's. Honestly, just a few boxes with memorabilia. In fact, my entire old life in someone else's basement, like a mausoleum.

I was speechless. I was silent for half a minute but my mother was used to it.

"You can do ... whatever you see fit."

I was not playing fair. I burdened her with the clutter. What was she supposed to do? Burn the old mementos? Pass them through a shredder?

“I’ll have to give those things away where I can, Sarah. Unless you want to come and get them.

“No. Give them away.”

“I’ll leave the photos. I can take this with me. But nothing more.”

A few of Alan’s books were left behind among the things. Those given as presents or the ones of special importance. I had to get rid of everything else.

“Thanks mum.”

The topic was closed forever.

Spasms shake my body, but it helps me regain my balance. I leave the toilet clutching the textbook in my hand. It has the power of the Bible, or some holy scripture. It is another sign. Would anyone believe my story and accept the evidence?

“Greta, there’s an order for a peanut butter sandwich with quad cheese and jam.” Just like yesterday.

“We’ve run out of peanut butter.”

I freeze at the doorstep of the kitchen. It’s not big, but it’s comfortable. In the middle there is an island with a steel top. There is a barbecue stand in the corner.

“What do you mean, We’ve run?”

“I finished the last jar yesterday ended and I forgot to order. Ask the customer what he wants instead? By the way, somebody’s got weird taste.”

“There must be some left!” An angry growl bursts from my chest. I am overwhelmed by rage. Greta looks at me surprised. Although she knows the whole palette of my grunts, she hasn’t heard anything like that before.

“But, Sarah, what am I supposed to do?”

“I will fix it.”

I go to the cloakroom. I put the book aside, grab my wallet.

“But where are you going ?! Who will mind the till?”

“I’ll be back in a tick!”

Greta gives me a shocked look. And I am moving at the speed of a tropical storm. I walk, almost run, focused on the goal. My son has to get a buttered sandwich because that’s what he likes best. I want to pamper him, give him whatever he wants.

I burst into a nearby grocery store. I’m in amok, though all I need to do is find a jar of peanut butter, not defuse a bomb. I pass shelves full of chips, cookies, salted peanuts. And suddenly I see the target, I am flying towards it like an arrow. I grab three at once and rush to the checkout. The cashier looks at me with a grimace on his face. I act like crazy, I know that. I start to giggle. First, softly to myself, but then I laugh at the top of my lungs.

The cashier watches this spectacle with a raised eyebrow.

I resemble rusty equipment that someone attempts to run after years of disuse, trumpeting to life like an old exhaust pipe.

I pay for the butter and run out of the store. I am nearly out of breath because I am in poor physical condition. But I am still laughing. Even when I hand the jars to Greta. Her eyes bulge, like a cartoon hero.

We’ve been working together for ten years, and she hasn’t seen me laughing yet.

“Uh ... shall I call Mick?”

“Why? Make that sandwich pronto, the customer is waiting.”

I turn and walk to the front dancing, the book under my arm. I can see that Casper has started his homework. He frowns, rubs his hand against his head. He has stumbled upon a problem.

He is wonderful. And he bites the tip of a pencil, just like Alan did. All pencils were bitten. And I always used to throw them away and buy him new ones.