

His (Lucky?) Arrival

In English, you say, “I was born.” Merely born, as if fate capriciously spat you into existence. In Polish, however, you *bear yourself* or bring yourself into the world—an active arrival; the verb is reflexive.

That’s the language. And then there is life.

Greg was in his twenties when he learned he had been unplanned—even unwanted. His mother told him. She dropped the revelation casually, between bites of cheesecake and sips of tea. If not for a neighbor, she added, he would have been terminated. That was the word she used. Not the pregnancy. Him.

The neighbor, a widow, who had lost her sole child during the war, asserted, “It [Greg, that is] is a boy.” Her conviction rested on her visions of galloping colts and Greg’s mother’s sudden fondness for apples. Apparently, pears or strawberries would have meant a girl. His mother never had a craving for apples before. Nor did she yearn for pears or strawberries when she was pregnant with Greg’s two sisters. But she feared another girl would mean she might end up with four or more children because Ziuta wanted a son. And she knew he could be quite *unrelenting*.

So, the women struck a pact: if a boy, he’d stay; if a girl, the widow would adopt her.

Greg wasn’t sure what to make of this arrangement, or of the “news” so nonchalantly shared with him over an afternoon tea. He had other, more shocking revelations to deal with at the time. Since then, however, apples had taken on a bittersweet flavor for Greg. Each bite carried the residue of a secret and consequential pact.

But at least his father was happy.

Józef, or Ziuta as he was affectionately called, was a cop at that time, attending the Police Academy. His superiors were not overly impressed by Greg's coming to the world, granting him no reprieve to celebrate. He sneaked out of the barracks at night, got on a red-eye train to Warsaw, and made a beeline to the hospital.

In those days, maternity wards stood as bastions, off-limits to men. But since Ziuta was a policeman and quite stubborn—or resolute, as he saw himself—he infiltrated the hospital's inner courtyard and stayed there. “Unwavering,” Greg's mother would recount, “calling my name, until a nurse took pity and smuggled you to a bathroom with a window facing the courtyard, then held you up for Ziuta to see.”

A little bundle, unrecognizable from a distance, but to his father, it was everything.

“It's a boy! My son!”

Greg had heard that story multiple times, in multiple versions. They played in his mind like a film reel. He could see his father standing there, in the cold and rain—it was November—with his arms raised, waving, raindrops blurring his silhouette. In one version, he held a grand bouquet of red roses for Greg's mother, while other women peered out from the bathroom window, their expressions a mixture of awe and envy—for young, eligible men were a rare commodity in those days. A porter shoved Greg's father out of the courtyard, yet he continued, “My boy! My little prince!” all the way out of the building. His proclamations bouncing off the hospital walls.