



**TO OUTWIT**  
**THE FATE**

K . E . A D A M U S

# **To outwit the fate**

by

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161 DAYS

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## Prologue

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I'm in prison, and I'll tell you honestly - I'm not happy about free meals and a roof over my head. Of course, I'm innocent and not in the same sense as half of the prisoners. Most swear at the ashes of loved ones that they did not commit the crimes they were accused of. The other prisoners are proud of their actions. I'm really innocent, but the court ruled otherwise. What does the truth look like? Judge for yourself!

## Robots won't give you money!

To succeed, you need to be in the right place at the right time with the right product for sale. I was always in the worst possible circumstances. With my head bowed, I waited for my “Damocles sword”, and instead of products, I carried the status of an individual experienced by fateful events.

On sunny days, I always found my feet in muddy puddles of a suspicious color and smell. On rainy days, umbrellas turned inside out and mocked me with broken wires. When I had scheduled essential tasks, the alarm did not ring, and I overslept most of my life events. When something nice happened, it aroused reasonable concern immediately. Maybe good events were just a prelude to some fatal situation in which I would lose the remains of my dignity?

Not wanting to play with fate, I hid at home and made small robots out of metal screws and plates. It took me all through high school to figure out how to create a self-propelling mechanism to make the robots move from time to time. I wanted to sell a few clones of my favorite prototype to my colleagues.

“These are puppets, not robots.” My friends were clear about their opinions. “Robots do something, and yours can only move from time to time with a limb.”

Being bitter, which was also due to fatal grades in mathematics and physics, I gave up my engineering career.

“You won't make money on screws!” my parents kept telling me every time I forgot to come to dinner, because I was working on another project.

This experience has taught me one thing - I will never earn on my passion. I had a lot of time to think. At that time, there was no public Internet available. One of my dreams was independence. I wanted to have my own money. The road to wealth rarely goes through the generally respected scheme: master's degree and work, but I didn't know that yet. I wanted special skills to help me find a job anytime, anywhere - regardless of time and place. Bemused by the widely propagated scheme, I did not go to technical college but to high school. Here I learned more details about the construction of the paramecium. I still didn't have any skills that would allow me to become independent. I didn't aim high. I just wanted to have my own money and replicate the generally promoted lifestyle - a once-a-year vacation and work for my home mortgage and future family needs.

After graduating high school, I still had time to verify this matrix. However, I decided to go to college and play with my fate. At eighteen, I was not attracted to any of the fields of study taught at universities and colleges. I found it worth taking care of myself in such a case and doing some self-analysis.

I was about to become a psychologist, set up my own office, and earn a lot of money, but I overslept and missed the train that was supposed to take me to the exam for psychological studies. I did a quick review of the other subjects of study to which I could still submit papers. I ended up in a nearby city, engaging in cultural studies. To my surprise, I passed the first semester without any problems and found the theories fascinating. I had already imagined myself as a professor of cultural studies, going to foreign seminars and publishing several scien-

tific books every year. Obviously, I saw myself as an author of wonderful books that can change the course of history.

That was until one day in May when I decided to buy truffle chocolates. The nearby store was dominated by pies, frankfurters, and fake chocolate products, so I decided to go to a supermarket on the city's outskirts. Of course, I forgot the monthly ticket and was fined by the controllers on the tram. This did not spoil my mood. Since something unpleasant had already happened, the rest of the day should be idyllic. It was not.

At the supermarket, a young child, eating a caramel bar he probably stole, vomited on me. Fortunately, the secretions did not reach the chocolates. I went to the most distant cash register to pass unnoticed through the supermarket, pay and clean my soiled clothes in the toilet. Two people stood at the cash register.

I stood shyly behind them, feeling I stunk off the kid's digestive juices. After reading thousands of thrillers, I always thought I was the perfect candidate for a spy, as I have a great sense of observation and perception. In fact, it took me two minutes to realize that one of my lecturers, doctor Plonski, was standing in line. I wanted to greet him politely, but the woman with him asked him first:

"Are you also buying your wife lard for dinner?"

"No, I'm buying her a mortadella," answered Dr. Plonski.

I was wondering what I should be most embarrassed about: the fact that I met the lecturer in my vomit-covered clothes (there was no sign that it was someone else's vomit, and the lecturer could think that it was my own), that I met the lecturer



with his mistress or that I spotted him with lack of class. His lover definitely deserved a ham.

Doctor Plonski did not share the mastery of perceptiveness either because only then he saw me.

“You will pay for shopping...” he said to his mistress and ran out of the supermarket.

“I think I’ll dump him,” the lover sighed to the cashier. “It was supposed to be a romantic dinner for two, and he buys lard, black pudding, and “supermarket” brand beer.”

“You should pay fifty-five zloty.” the cashier replied.

“So much?”

“If you can’t afford it, sweetheart, there will be no romantic dinner!” The cashier apparently did not tolerate betrayal.

The doctor’s mistress dug out the money from her purse. She handed the cashier a hundred-zloty banknote in a gesture of presenting her hand to kiss. Amused, I waited for the cashier’s next move. She did not disappoint me. She took out a marker pen and checked whether the banknote was forged. Without a word, she gave the change, ignoring the woman’s outstretched hand and spilling money on the tray.

She scanned my chocolates without waiting for the doctor’s lover to collect the money.

“It would be better to spend that money on laundry,” she said without returning my smile.

I decided not to tell anyone about doctor Plonski’s affair. Keeping my secret, I felt like a 100% gentleman. Also, I’ve never dealt with gossip, considering it offensive to my dignity.

Unfortunately, doctor Plonski did not know about this. He probably assumed that news about his lover was broadcasted

even on student radio. He devoted his first lecture after the unfortunate meeting to the topic of betrayal.

For an hour and a half, he described the social and cultural inclinations of betrayal in various countries and among diverse ethnic groups. He quoted funny anecdotes, proverbs, and numerous quotes. The students laughed and whispered comments among themselves about the lecture.

“Faithfulness is a strong itch with the prohibition of scratching” - doctor Plonski finished his lecture, quoting Julian Tuwim. He quickly gathered his things and left the hall without waiting for the students’ questions.

During the lecture, I had the impression that the lecturer was watching me. I didn’t feel comfortable with it. I waited anxiously for the final oral exam. As it turned out, the fear was justified.

On the day of the exam, bad luck faithfully accompanied my meager person. After celebrating his successful passing of the course’s exam, the roommate, with a hangover, poured a pot of baked beans on my prepared suit. Only the pants survived. The jacket was suitable for three rounds of dry cleaning. The other clothes were wet after successfully accessing the washing machine in the dorm. An embarrassed roommate pulled his XXL blue sweater with a pink diamond pattern out of the closet. *Nolens volens*, I put on this monstrous sweater and ran for the exam.

I was third in line to check my knowledge. Doctor Plonski ignored my greeting, ordered me to sit down, and asked the first question.

“Please tell me, based on your knowledge, about the cultural conditions of the rumor.”

“So the rumors unite social groups.” I began maneuvering through the maze of information gained from the lecture and read in the past scientific publications. “They can constitute successful interpersonal communication. Sometimes they can even turn into anecdotes and, for example, urban legends...”

“Wrong,” the lecturer interrupted, “You talk about the effects and role of gossip all the time, and I asked about the cultural conditions of their creation. Let’s move on to the next question. Please talk about betrayal in African tribes; I saw you...”

“I was just buying chocolates!” I interrupted.

“I don’t know anything about chocolates,” answered the doctor. “I saw you, you were at this lecture, so the question should be straightforward.”

From the information about the African tribes, I only remembered the one about the Hotatots’ steatopygia, so I stayed silent, terrified, without even trying to improvise.

“The last question,” doctor Plonski broke the onerous silence, “Please, give me a definition of socialization on the example of Polish Tatars.”

“Before answering the question, I will tell an anecdote about the invention of a dish called Tatar...” I began to describe the adventures of a raw chop under Tatar saddle when the doctor interrupted me.

“You’re raving. I hope that you will be better prepared for the retake exam.”

I left the room devastated. With a high score from previous exams, I was counting on a scholarship, but apparently, bad luck had only gone on a few months’ vacations, and now it was working with doubled energy.

“You traitor!” I cursed at the doctor. I wanted to tell everyone about his affair, but after failing the exam, I became unreliable. I regretted my gentleman’s discretion.

“Another top score?” Alice asked.

I didn’t want to talk to her. I liked her in the first class when I watched her athletically built body, but the charm lasted until she turned and I saw her face. She was ugly; her dun, small eyes, beaked nose, and wide face effectively discouraged me.

Unfortunately, this animosity did not work the other way. Alice apparently fell in love with me. She kept bringing me lunch, lending lecture notes, and always tried to sit in the next seat in the class.

She was intelligent and had extensive knowledge. Conversations with her could improve the mood of each interlocutor. It bothered me. If only she would understand that we can only be buddies. Her courtship prevented me from making friends with Monica. Despite the jet-black hair, Monica behaved like a dumb blonde from jokes. Still, her beauty charmed all students so much that they forgave her mental deficiencies.

“So, how did it go?” Alice repeated the question.

“I failed.” I wanted to give my speech a nonchalant tone, but my voice let me down, and only a thin squeal escaped my throat.

“It’s probably because of that Masonic sweater,” I heard the sweetest voice of the year.

It was Monica who interrupted our conversation. Immediately, my zest came back. *She’s so funny; maybe she pretends to be silly*, I thought. *Maybe this is my few seconds’ chance to get her attention.*

“Well, if I go through the next stage in the lodge, I’ll certainly pass all the subjects, even without going to lectures,” I continued with a smile.

“Until then, you will fill in this too-big sweater and it will destroy itself from walking in it every day,” Monica smiled sweetly.

Other students standing nearby began to laugh. No retort came to mind, so I began to laugh, immediately self-effacing.

“It probably won’t happen,” I said. “I’ll gain weight, so the sweater will become too tight, and I will walk in another one.”

Alice grabbed my loosely hanging sleeve and pulled me aside.

“You could have a little more dignity,” she began to rebuke me. “Don’t let some small brains bully you, even if they are set in a beautiful face.”

“She was definitely joking,” I began to defend myself. “Besides, you must have a distance to yourself, right?”

“You would forgive her even if she poured a bucket of cesspool water over you.” “How do you know?”

“That’s it. I just saw a sample of this activity,” Alice sighed and took me for a coffee at a nearby cafe.

In case of failing the first exam, it was still possible to take two others - the retake ones. Throughout the holidays, I sat over the notes and read academic readings not to give doctor Plonski satisfaction during the retake exam. I interrupted my education only to pick up one of the robots neglected during my studies.

I arrived in the dorm on the eve of the first retake exam date. I preferred to pay for accommodation and be sure I would be on time. I read my notes until 3 a.m. Finally, tired, I set the

alarm clock and went to sleep. My roommate was still studying for the organic chemistry retake exam.

The next day, I woke up with a strange sense of defeat. Something was wrong. It was a beautiful September day outside, and it looked like it was noon, not morning. I jumped up, terrified. Next to my alarm clock were its batteries and a card from my roommate.

"I'm sorry, but the alarm clock is ticking too loudly, and I can't focus on science."

I could hardly read the doodle of a future chemist. My alarm on the cell phone didn't ring either. I dressed quickly and ran to the university. Doctor Plonski was already gone. I waited two hours in the queue at the secretary's office. When my turn finally came, stuttering, I explained the situation.

The secretary told me to write an application for the next exam date. It took me a few minutes to fill in the application, but I had to wait in line again.

"Did you know that the first retake exam date is already over?" the secretary said after reading the application.

"It's because of that chemistry student," I began to defend myself.

"Please be prepared for the fact that, as a humanist, you will lose any battle with engineers' kind of minds!" said the secretary and with a loud, "Thank you, that's all!" let me know that the audience in the secretariat is over.

After a week, a letter came with a new exam date. However, bad luck did not let go. My godfather died. On the day of the exam I went to the funeral. I asked my godfather's wife for a copy of the death certificate to present the document at the university and explain why I didn't attend the exam again. She

murmured something about the desirability of the inheritance, commenting on my request, and it ended there.

Soon a letter about my removal from the student list came. My parents knew nothing about these problems, and I wanted it to stay that way. They were poor, and I knew that my studies seriously affected the household budget.

I decided to write a letter to the provost of the university. I described the meeting with doctor Plonski and his lover, I just didn't remember what they were buying, and I wrote about the headcheese in the letter. The answer came quickly.

In abusive words, the rector informed me that he personally knows doctor Plonski, who is allergic to headcheese. Besides, he is an exemplary husband and father. The rector wrote that he could take the case to court for alleged slander.

In the end, he added that I had a "wolf ticket", which in Poland meant a lifelong ban on studying at his university. In this way, my attempt to become independent, using generally respected tricks, that is, study, study, and then work full-time, ended in failure. However, I wasn't going to give up

## Your baccalaureate won't give you a job!

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I concealed my defeat from my family. At the end of September, I packed my stuff and pretended to attend university. Earlier, Alicia had agreed to let me live with her in the dormitory. She had a single room, a privilege rarely available to second year students. However, Alicia got extra points for working on the dormitory residents' board and being an orphan.

"My parents abandoned me because I was ugly."

She sometimes felt sorry for herself after drinking too much alcohol. Usually, I didn't know how to respond to such exaggerations. If I had said she wasn't ugly, I would have lied. Her ugliness would have been confirmed if I had said it was for another reason. That's why I murmured under my nose that everything would be okay and patted her on the back.

Alicia asked one of her colleagues from the residents' board to issue me with a student dormitory card. At the entrance of the building, a bodyguard wandered around in the evenings. He took advantage of the students out of frustration with his unfulfilled ambition to pass the secondary school exams.

The guests of the residents had to leave their identity documents at the reception desk, and if they did not have a card signed by the residents' board, they had to pay several dozen zlotys for their stay when they left the dormitory after midnight. That's why I needed an actual permanent resident card. A few days after moving into Alicia's room, I went to the Employment Office to register as unemployed.



“You do not come under our authority,” said the agency worker. “Please go to the district office where you are a permanent resident.”

I tried to beg the woman, but she was not impressed by my experience and descriptions of life disasters.

“If you are unlucky, you won’t be able to prove yourself at work anyway,” she said and screamed: “Next!” towards the queue.

With a strange feeling in my stomach, I left the building after checking the noticeboard. They were looking for a welder, electrician, and baker. Nobody was looking for unemployed high school graduates. For a moment, I remembered my dream to possess the skills that would help me find a job everywhere and anytime. Why didn’t I become a super electrician?

A beautiful October day was not a time to get depressed with its transparent air, golden and purple leaves of trees in parks and on the streets, and slanted rays of sunshine. It was certainly not the perfect weather for suicides.

However, just in case, I brewed St. John’s wort, which has a slightly antidepressant effect. I could not afford despair and self-pity. After drinking the infusion, I felt an influx of energy, although I felt like I was under some intoxicating substance.

I ran downstairs to an internet cafe (Alicia had her laptop secured with a password), and full of inspiration, I started to write a brief resume.

I skipped a year of studying to avoid employers asking questions about my failure, and instead, I extended my distribution of leaflets and advertising material by a year. I added a photo from the mountains, in which my athletic figure looked nice. My face, with dark hair and green eyes, looked handsome be-

cause of the small number of pixels; no one could see the few pimples that always blemished my face.

I then registered on the job search portal and sent my CV to fifty different places. I applied for a waiter, sales representative, call center employee, security guard, and chef's assistant positions. I always made good scrambled eggs. Satisfied, I returned to Alicia's room.

My friend had just come back from class. When I saw her, she looked at me with a confused face.

"Tell me right away what happened," I asked.

"Terrible rumors are spreading about you. Everyone says you didn't pass, despite easy questions, and that you're too stupid to study."

"In a year, I'll be passing the exams on economics or law or psychology. Now, I have to find a job because I won't get a student loan this year."

"You are intelligent. You will surely find something."

"Intelligent people are looking for jobs with the required higher education. I don't have the qualifications now; I just need anything."

As it turned out, finding "just about anything" wasn't so easy, especially since bad luck didn't let me go. I sent fifty different applications every day, but the phone remained silent.

Only after two weeks, I was called with an offer to work on sorting product elements in a nearby factory. I put on a suit and a blue shirt - because it is said that blue color has some effect and most entrepreneurs and politicians wear it. I put my only Gore-Tex jacket on top of that and headed to the meeting.

The sporty coat didn't correspond well with my elegant outfit, so I took it off two blocks from the factory building and

put it in a bag. A few steps later, I felt a smack on my shoulder. It was a flying pigeon that had released its droppings on me.

I cursed all the gods and was going to condemn them for several generations back and forth, but I got a little lost and looped because of my lack of knowledge about gods of all kinds. I was in a hurry.. I did not have a handkerchief. They were in the backpack, which I usually carried with me. So I appeared shitty and stinky for the interview.

“Lucky you,” the obese lady from the HR department tried to joke, but her crooked face suggested my candidacy would not be considered. “Unfortunately, we’ve already filled all the vacancies,” she said after a while.

“Then why didn’t anyone cancel the meeting?” I was outraged.

“I do not like your attitude,” she replied, “There are jobs in advertising waiting for rebels, but you do not have the proper education and skills for that. Please work on yourself.”

“And I suggest you practice your posture through gymnastics. It would be useful to lose a few dozen kilograms, so your spine can rest,” I answered.

Rarely have I been so nasty, but I felt that I had come to the end of allowing myself to be disregarded. I didn’t know this was only the beginning of more perverse events and my dignity and honor would be irretrievably lost.

“Goodbye,” she said. “At least I don’t have to wear a bird poo on myself.”

I felt that I had lost my voice due to emotions, so I couldn’t muster any retort, and the woman triumphantly watched my back as I departed. A few minutes later, the phone rang. It

turned out that it was about a job in a call center. Unfortunately, my voice still has not returned to normal.

“Yes, I would be happy to work after hours,” I squeaked into the handset.

“Unfortunately, your voice does not sound trustworthy. Is it a mutation? How old are you?”

“Temporary sore throat.” I tried to defend myself.

“You have a problem with your throat so early in the autumn? This does not bode well,” said my interlocutor and hung up.

“Fucking hell.”

“What’s the problem?” I heard behind me.

I turned around and saw a monk. I did not know anything about monk’s uniforms, so it was difficult initially to know who I was dealing with.

So the messenger of God was standing in front of me. I could devour him without consequences; he would turn the other cheek.

“I am looking for a job, and your God is interfering with that. He is an incarnate evil!” I started my speech with a squeaky voice.

“The paths of the Lord are not being explored,” answered the religious man.

“I am not a believer, but if God exists and you are his messenger, the world is in a bad situation,” I said.

Considering the conversation to be over, I began to move on.

“We also have many non-believers,” continued the monk.

“Is this some kind of hidden camera?” I asked him, confused.

“This is my business card.” He gave me a piece of paper.  
“When you are ready, call me.”

“Why do I need a faggot’s business card!”

His quick punch to my jaw confused me a little.

“Shit!” I said in shock. It was the only word I could think of. The monk left with a springy step without looking back.

I picked up the business card from the sidewalk and dropped it into the bag.

“Show it, show it!” Alicia tormented me two hours later.

“Brother Edgar’s spiritual advice,” she read out loud when I handed her the card.

“Maybe I’ll join the monastery for a year?” I started to fool around, hiding my resentment and the insult to honor behind jokes. I couldn’t even fight. “Food and accommodation for free. And I’ll probably learn boxing.”

“They will lock you up and not let you go.”

“I’ll grow a beard, memorize motivational talk and become a monk guru.”

My jokes didn’t even make sense to me. I couldn’t stay with Alicia all the time; someone could report my presence, and she would have problems.

The next day I was woken up by a phone ringtone in the morning. A lovely lady called with an offer of a job in security. I confirmed that I knew the intervention techniques, and she arranged a meeting with the boss the next day.

Satisfied, I put my cell phone away. And suddenly the phone started to ring and ring. They called about various offers, from sales representatives to administrators, and they all wanted to make an appointment at the same time as the lady in charge of security.

“Unfortunately, I can’t make it tomorrow. I am taking my colleague to the airport,” I lied.

“We are looking for available people. Those who put work before their personal life,” I heard every time.

After answering eleven calls, I turned off my cell phone and dug into my sleeping bag. The bed in the room was only one meter wide, and despite Alicia’s suggestion to sleep on it together, I preferred a sleeping bag and a mattress on the floor.

I sent a text message to Alicia: “Does shit happen for a reason or not for a reason?”

“What happened this time? Were you robbed by some great-grandmother?” she wrote back.

“All employers want me to multiply my person and simultaneously go to several job interviews.”

“I’ll buy wine. That’s a good sign.”

*I have become Alice’s keeper*, I thought.

Recently she had been buying food for both of us and cooking dinners in a shared kitchen on the first floor. She also left me some change for coffee in the city when I was distributing my poor resume to all kinds of institutions.

“I think it’s time for me to write to Brother Edgar and ask the Holy Spirit to intercede so I can be in several places simultaneously,” I replied.

“Brother Edgar fancies your legs.”

The next day, freshly shaved and smelling Alice’s unisex perfume, I went for an interview. I woke up on time and caught the bus... and the bad luck started.

A woman started giving birth on the bus. The driver stopped the vehicle and waited for the ambulance. I got off and wanted to call a taxi, but my mobile phone refused to co-

operate. After dialing the number, there was only noise, and I couldn't make the call. I tried to borrow a phone from someone, but everyone answered in the negative, without even listening to my explanation. After half an hour, another bus arrived. Unfortunately, I arrived too late at my destination.

"The next candidates are being interviewed now. And by the way, this lack of punctuality is a bad sign of the candidate," said the receptionist.

She was not moved by my stories about the woman giving birth.

"That's how everyone explains themselves. If they were telling the truth about all these births, we would have a real baby boom," she said.

After leaving the building, I felt that I had to defraud the change for coffee from Alicia. I entered an academic pub and ordered a beer. Then another one. And another one. A newspaper with advertisements was lying on the table. I started to browse through the offers, and suddenly my gaze stopped on one of the announcements.

"I will pay for male companionship. 250 zlotys per hour of conversation," it read.

*If I talked and talked or listened for three hours, I would earn a month's rent for a room. I started to calculate. But probably the same person doesn't spend so much money in the same way, so maybe I'll place an advertisement.*

After drinking alcohol, I did various ill-considered things, and placing an advertisement via SMS about being able to provide escort services was one of those things.

"A handsome twenty-year-old will talk to you, listen to you, pretend to be your boyfriend in front of your friends."

I didn't mention anything about sex and decided to explain it every time I talked to potential clients over the phone. The announcement was supposed to be published in a new newspaper issue in the next few days. Buzzed up after a few beers, I decided not to wait a few days for the Eldorado but to call about the conversation for 250 zlotys.

"What advertisement?" my cell phone worked, but the interlocutor didn't know what was happening. "It must have been my friends who tricked me. And how much do I supposedly pay? 250 zlotys? Come and see me, sweetie. I'm already preparing coffee!"

I was stressed out by this conversation, but I decided not to give up. The address was in the city center, close to the pub. Fifteen minutes later, I pressed the bell at the door of the tenement house.

"Is that you, sweetheart? Please come in."

The woman had a pleasant voice, which did not announce the sight of a gorgon, which appeared to me three minutes later. She weighed about 200 kilograms, placed in tight leggings. The t-shirt stained with food showed that the owner was without a bra.

"It's only a conversation," I started to repeat the mantra in my mind, also losing about 50 percent of the respect I still had for myself.

"Show me, sweetheart, the announcement," she said. "My name is Aneta. Ha ha ha... Two hundred and fifty zlotys per hour of conversation. So, honey, what are we going to talk about?"

"Would you like to talk about everything to me?" I suggested. "I guess you're lonely..."



“Where did you get these ideas from? Why do you think so?” she leaned her hands on her fat hips.

“Otherwise, my friends would not have placed an advertisement,” I guessed that talking about her obesity wouldn’t bring a friendly atmosphere to the conversation.

“Maybe that’s right. Wait a moment; I’ll bring the cake to the coffee.”

After ten minutes of Aneta’s absence, I thought she might have fainted, and I wanted to go to rescue her when she appeared naked at the door. Her legs were unshaven, and her bikini area was bushy too. She touched her blonde hair with black roots with her hand and said:

“Well, get ready, sweetheart, because I won’t pay for the conversation.”

“I’m a virgin, so you understand,” I lied.

“I don’t mind at all.”

“This first time must be magical.”

“Hocus-pocus,” she answered with an old joke. “Is that enough?”

“No!”

I grabbed my bag and started running. Naked Aneta started chasing me up the stairs.

“Come back. You haven’t earned anything yet!” She didn’t run out into the street, but I was rushing further towards the dormitory door with a traumatic image of naked Aneta written in my subconscious mind.

I didn’t tell Alicia about my gigolo excesses. It wasn’t something to share with a person in love with you. A few days later, she raised the subject herself.

“I saw your ad!”

My phone number was printed in the announcement. Most of my friends didn't even remember their mobile phone numbers, so I felt safe. Unfortunately, clearly, Alicia knew my number by heart.

"This is not going to be a bad thing," I started to defend myself. "No sex, just talking and pretending to be a boyfriend in front of friends or co-workers of a given person."

"You value yourself cheaply."

"What, am I not counting enough?" I made a joke.

"And what were you looking for in social advertisements?"

"I want to write a scientific paper on gigolos."

"I can provide you with some material," I told her about Aneta with details.

"A gigolo virgin is a bit of a stretch..."

The conversation was interrupted by an incoming SMS on my mobile phone.

"I am interested in your offer. There's a long engagement at stake. Meet me at the cafe to discuss the details. Greetings, Pelagia."

I showed Alicia the message. Her face turned red with emotion.

"You really can't find a normal job?"

"I've been looking for it for a month now. I would prefer a regular job myself, but as you can see, bad luck doesn't give up. I can't stay with you because your neighbors already know I'm staying here. You may have problems." I replied to a text message and set up a meeting in a cafe rarely frequented by students, far from a student town.

I put on a suit and a beige shirt I had received for my birthday last year from Alicia. She noticed this and looked upset.

"It's just a reconnaissance," I started explaining.

Alicia did not answer. She took out a can of beer from the fridge. I saw she was in a bad mood, but I didn't have time.

I ran out of the room and rushed to the cafe. Pelagia said she was blonde and would be dressed in black. I went into the restaurant and saw a few blondes in black dresses sitting alone at tables.

"It's some kind of sponsor ladies' gathering," I thought, assessing their age at forty to fifty. One of the women waved her hand towards me.

She looked about fifty years old, but she was well groomed and beautiful. Oxidized blonde hair did not show a single centimeter of roots. Gentle make-up, green eyes... Why is this woman looking for a gigolo?

"Mrs. Pelagia?" I came up intimidated.

"Darling, how old are you? Not too early for such a job?"

I sat down at the table and briefly told my story of the last few months.

"I think I can help you," she said.

In exchange for an hour spent together every day, she offered a room with food in her apartment and a small allowance. She did not require sexual services, which I wanted to believe in.

After her husband's death, she felt lonely. She was childless and had no close family or friends in the city. She thought about offering some company to a friendly female student but was afraid of accusations of homosexuality. I couldn't believe my happiness. Didn't the lousy luck let it go?

"What's the catch?" I asked.

“It is a little bizarre but harmless,” said Pelagia. “During this time spent together, you must wear a mask.”

In my thoughts, I remembered various masks from thrillers and felt a bit strange.

“I made the mask two years ago,” continued Pelagia. “It’s my face, two years younger. It may signify oddity and vanity, but I’d like to see myself when I was a little younger. This will create a certain mood for conversation.”

“I’m in,” I’ve decided. I wanted to pray in my thoughts, but I remembered that I had a private war with a god or gods. If they existed, it was better not to irritate them.

## Mrs Pelagia

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On returning to the dorm, I went crazy and bought a bottle of wine. There was something to celebrate. I would find time to study for the admission exams, although I didn't know yet which field of study. I wouldn't have to worry about the rent or the cost of food. Not only that, but I would have twenty-three hours of spare time. Maybe during this time, I would learn a foreign language and possibly deepen my humanistic knowledge.

However, Alicia was not as happy as I was. When I came back, I found her drunk and babbling about her ugliness.

"In a few years, I'll graduate from college, get wrinkles, and be even uglier. If I were to graduate in economics or law, I would probably be able to afford plastic surgery. Unfortunately, I am studying cultural studies. I won't even be able to afford Botox. I will have to work as a saleswoman in my uncle's liquor store."

"I'm sure the clients will pay you compliments," I tried to make a joke.

Alicia started to cry. She looked even worse than usual, although earlier, I had doubted that was possible.

"I'm getting uglier day by day," she sobbed. "My female friends, when I encounter them, have an expression of triumph on their faces because they are prettier. Handsome men don't notice my existence. When I walk past them on the street they never look at me. They walk by like I was the air, as if I didn't exist at all. What if instead of me having walked by some sex bomb, they would probably get a heart attack from the over ex-

citement. For a year, my hair has been falling out. In the back of my head, you can already see the gaps. My eyes are getting increasingly scooped out, and my teeth are crooked. I look like a creature from a bad fantasy novel!

“Your body is very nice,” I threw in a compliment. “And your face is simply average but not ugly,” I lied.

“You’re lying!”

“I need to pack,” I changed the subject. I started to throw my things into my backpack.

“Are you leaving?” She was surprised.

I told her briefly about the agreement with Mrs. Pelagia.

“You believed her that she would not demand sex?”

“Nothing has happened between us either, even though we have been living together,” I began to explain. “And yet, everyone considers us a couple.”

“Then you must be suffering immensely from this? What would Monica would say about these revelations?”

“I doubt if she would believe it,” I snapped out.

“Oh yeah? Get out!” Alicia yelled, grabbing a kitchen knife.

I quickly gathered my things and retreated from the room. I had not yet seen Alicia in anger, and I had no desire to see how she behaved in such a state. I had listened earlier about her great-grandparent’s rapturous characters, dueling over anything. As I ran down the dormitory stairs, I saw myself being stabbed by Ala.

I guess it will be a while before I see her again. My mood was a little spoiled by such a breakup. I thought we would sit down with wine, laugh, and talk about Mrs. Pelagia and her masks. Why couldn’t Alicia accept her appearance? Every-

one always liked her. At parties, she amused the company with anecdotes. Over the coffee, she spun interesting philosophical derivations, and it was sometimes difficult to follow her flow of reasoning, because it was that much sophisticated. Whenever she noticed this, she would immediately use a simple vocabulary to explain more intricate reflections. Hardly anyone commented on her ugliness. No one made fun of her appearance, and no one had to think about it except me - whom she adored, or herself.

At Mrs. Pelagia's door, I wondered about the form of apology and pardoning Alicia. Pressing the button on the intercom, I was already thinking of something else. How about Mrs. Pelagia? Will she open naked? What will happen to me then? Where will I live? No bodily close-ups were considered by me. However, I was needlessly worried. Ms. Pelagia opened the door dressed in a thick, long sweater, with an image of Santa Claus, and leggings. Her blond hair was curled in rollers.

"This is how I curl my hair from time to time when I get bored with straight hair," she began to explain.

"Then you are an original because usually women are divided into those who are proponents of either straight or curly hair."

"Yes, I know. Most often, those with naturally straight hair curl it, and those with curly hair straighten it. Please, come inside."

The apartment consisted of a living room, where bamboo light furniture reigned supreme, and on the walls hung African masks, Mrs. Pelagia's bedroom, which I preferred not to explore, and the kitchen and bathroom. What was missing was a second room for me.

“My dear, you will sleep in the lounge,” Mrs. Pelagia seemed to read my mind.

“No one visits me anymore, so you can make this room a second bedroom.”

“Don’t you have any friends? Colleagues?” I was surprised.

“I always had friends until they met me with their husband or partner. I used to be beautiful. They immediately were jealous, seeing the partner’s attention, focused on me.”

*I wonder how Alicia would comment on that,* I thought.

“What about men? Didn’t you have friends among them?”

“First, there was my husband, who would not accept any of my male friends. He was not someone notable, despite that he seemed so promising. I would even say that he was mediocre. He graduated in philosophy but negated all the knowledge he had acquired, claiming that from thinking, people were getting mad, and that the theories he had learned were worthless. I met him in college when he was still an idealist. He talked a lot about self-discipline, shaping one’s character, and working on himself. Later he ended up as a loser, sitting in front of the TV and eating up sweets because of his lost life. That’s why I started cheating on him. These were not successful romances. I hoped to meet someone of value and get a divorce, but I ended up with playboys only.”

“Wasn’t it better to live alone?” I asked shyly.

“No. I can’t be alone. I start going crazy. That’s why you are here now.”

An intrusive thought came to me that it was because of Mrs. Pelagia that all the men in her life were becoming losers. I did not share this reflection. One knife-threatening woman a day is enough. Besides, honesty hardly ever pays off.



“Since I’ve been alone, I’ve been going crazy in many ways. I learned to crochet and make nice sweaters, but when finished, I rip them, and from the same fibers, I make another ones. All of them are black in color. At least once a month I write denunciations of people who have in any way harmed me. Sometimes such a denunciation is more than a dozen pages long.”

“Really? What do you write about there?”

“About everything, they have to hide what is illegal. I used to work for the police, so I have no problems collecting such data. Almost every Pole has some illegal programs on the computer or downloaded movies. This is punishable. When a husband cheats, I write a denunciation to his wife.”

“Do you feel better about it?”

“It gives me some satisfaction, but for a short time. I have become addicted to cigarettes. I can smoke three packs a day. Every Friday, I drink whiskey alone.”

“Why only on Fridays?”

“The weekend starts. Friends make appointments, and lovers go on dates, whereas I sit alone in an empty apartment, forgotten by everyone.”

“If you signed your denunciations, indeed, a lot of people would remember you,” I tried to joke.

“O, you won’t have an easy life with such an attitude,” said Mrs. Pelagia.

“Attitude is an attitude, but I would be much happier if lousy luck had left me.”

I began to tell about my adventures and fate when looking for a job.

“My dear,” Ms. Pelagia interrupted me, “by talking about bad luck, you put yourself in the role of a victim, a puppet

tossed here and there by the twists of fate. It is not quite the most important thing that happens to us, but our reaction to the situations that arise. You can live your entire life by doing things the wrong way, blaming fate and complex and unfavorable conditions, and not trying to live actively.”

“I did what I could,” I answered. “After all, I was actively looking for a job after the disaster at college. I went to interviews. Is it my fault that I got shit on by a pigeon or that some woman decided to deliver a baby on the bus?”

“I think that if you approached it diplomatically, both situations could be successfully resolved. You are not yet able to properly talk to people.”

“And how, for example, was I supposed to talk when I lost my voice and had a call about a call center job?”

“You lost because you let your emotions take over your body.”

I guess I wasn't yet ready for the brainwashing that Mrs. Pelagia wanted to serve me. I politely apologized to her and asked if I could unpack and take a shower. I felt the daily time spent with this woman would be quite a torture.

I stuffed my things in the bamboo furniture and decided to take a long shower. In the bathroom, there was both a bathtub and a shower cabin. I was tempted to take a bath in the tub, but nowhere did I see utensils to wash it, and I didn't want to take a bath without first scrubbing the enamel surface. I recalled Mrs. Pelagia's mention of her affairs, and my thoughts revolved around the germs of STDs occupying the tub sides. So I took a shower. I usually slept in my underwear but wrapped my hips with a towel, not wanting to overexpose my body.

This is how Mrs. Pelagia saw me when I stepped into the kitchen to drink a glass of water. She gave me a lustful gaze. Her eyes glazed over, and her face covered with sweat. I felt very uncomfortable with this silent adoration.

Why do I keep getting myself into situations like this? Why, instead of Mrs. Pelagia, isn't a horny Monica sitting at the table? Now not only will I be listening to pro development gibberish, but I will also probably be molested by a fifty-year-old woman.

"Relax," said Mrs. Pelagia. "You are terribly tense. Why don't we look for some programs on the radio to listen to?"

"A broadcast?"

All I could think of were Catholic radio stations. What kind of broadcast does she want to listen to? She has brought home a young boy and will pray the rosary with him or listen to ramblings about the pure evil that is contraception, according to those running the programs?

"The full hour spent together hasn't passed yet," said Mrs. Pelagia. "Wait, I'll bring the mask."

Suddenly my stomach started to hurt. Needless to say, I was in quite a mess.

I should not have pissed Alicia off and lived with her until I found a job. After all, everyone says there are no shortcuts in life. Why didn't I think of this earlier? The offer seemed to be so simple. Probably, Mrs. Pelagia is a psychopath. Who typically makes a caller wear a mask, especially with an image of her face? Apparently, some psychopaths have a unique personal charm. Maybe that caused me to agree to live with this woman? The mask was a perfect representation of Mrs. Pelagia's face.

It was made of some kind of plastic. On the back, there was a lock. A wig was placed over the whole thing. Fortunately, it turned out to be too small for my face. Mrs. Pelagia could not get over this fact. She wanted so much to look at herself. I suggested that she look in the mirror.

She became quite indignant, and for several minutes I had to listen about the insensitivity of young people, about their stupidity and self confidence. After complaining about my generation, it was time to criticize politicians and the setup of our country.

“What kind of country is this, where plastic surgery is so expensive? Politicians only want to take advantage of working people. Once they become unfit for work and retire, they are allowed to die slowly and grow old without sufficient funds for medicines, not to mention entertainment or improving their appearance.”

This was the second time I had to listen to that day about plastic surgery.

Mrs. Pelagia talked, giving prices of the various procedures and bragging about the Botox done.

“Apparently, daily gymnastics helps keep you young,” I interjected.

“The audience is over,” said Mrs. Pelagia.

She brought a folding bed from the basement and unfolded it in the lounge.

“If you are uncomfortable, you can always sleep with me. I have a big bed.”

And so my nightmare began. Nothing was easy. I decided to stay at Mrs. Pelagia’s, disregarding her eccentricities and quiet adoration of my person. Thanks to the fact that I was pro-

vided with lodging and food, I could concentrate on preparing for college. I was not going to give up on higher education just because doctor Plonski was allergic to the cheap food. On the other hand, the problem was choosing the right course of study. Studying at a previous university was out of the question, as I was given a 'wolf ticket'.

There was still a technical university in the city, but I had little talent for science subjects, so I turned down that option. All that was left for me was to move to a larger city and study there. I just didn't know what I wanted to study. Cultural studies interested me, but Alicia's speech about working in a liquor store somewhat extinguished my enthusiasm for exploring this field of knowledge.

I decided to try again to apply for psychology again. To get into these studies, it was necessary to pass a test of general knowledge and an examination of study skills. I decided to study for the exam in the library's reading room. When I was laying out books in the kitchen, Mrs. Pelagia always sat down and spun her life wisdom.

The main message of her talkative outbursts was the thesis that everyone is the blacksmith of his fate. My recent experiences were too fresh to agree with her.

To avoid these chatterboxes, I started spending time in the reading room. It was getting cold, and sitting in the park with a book was a no - go. I didn't have a lot of money for cafes, and I felt silly sitting there over one cup of coffee for several hours. The reading room was warm and dry. I usually chose a seat by the window and contemplated from time to time the nasty weather outside when I had breaks from studying.

Mrs. Pelagia called me on average eight times in one hour. I muted the phone, but I could hear the vibration of it as calls came in. I did not answer. No calls were allowed in the reading room. Besides, I had no desire to talk to her.

Usually, my day looked as follows. Mrs. Pelagia would wake me up at nine in the morning for breakfast. After breakfast I would go to the reading room for a few hours. Around two o'clock, I would return for lunch. After that, I waited patiently for our hour spent together.

Already at lunch, Mrs. Pelagia was asking why I didn't answer the phone when it rang. I explained that I spent that time in the reading room studying. Not believing me, she commented that I was probably dating some girl. I was explaining that even if I wanted to, girls go to school, college, or work at this time of the day. Mrs. Pelagia kept extending the time until our "hour." She simply wanted me to stay longer at home.

"Just a moment, my dear. I'll just watch a replay of this TV series." "Just a moment. I'll just finish reading a chapter of this book." And so on.

Finally, she graciously granted me an audience. At the same time, she smoked like a dragon, and I often choked on smoke as she smoked five cigarettes in a row.

However, I had to admit that our conversations were often fascinating. Mrs. Pelagia was well-read. She covered topics in the social sciences, and sometimes, she talked about the books she had read. She told me about various scientific theories, so it was not time wasted. After an hour spent together, I would go to the bamboo room and read books. Later there was dinner. After dinner, I would go for a walk, often in the company of Mrs. Pelagia.

She would drag me sometimes to cafes or pubs, where she bought mulled wine for us. Sometimes she was good company and in such moments I forgot about her uncompromising character. She was very fond of instructing me, and invariably she would wait for me to come out of the shower.

I missed the carefree period of my first year at university when I lived in a dormitory, and the only adverse event was when a roommate used up all of my shower gel or ate my food. Even Alicia's was better. Her adoration was more subtle than Mrs. Pelagia's. That's why when I once returned from the reading room to find Mrs. Pelagia dead, I was a little relieved.