Future historians will surely look back at our times as interesting and dangerous. So it was during Europe's Reformation, when a curious and courageous old widow brings Poland's Queen Bona Sforza to a moral tipping point.

Kasia's Story

By Ken Parejko

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1

1 May, 1519

When I thought I was learning to live, I was also learning to die.

Leonardo da Vinci,
Codex Atlanticus, fol.252r-a

The sun, reflecting off the high stone wall, drove the chill from the air.

It was her first time at the bookstalls near the University. To get the attention of the young man sitting and reading behind a rough pile of books she cleared her throat. Again. She could tell, when at last he looked up, how surprised he was to be facing a woman. He was thin and handsome, his eyes warmly curious. He reminded Kasia of her son Andrzej, who could also lose himself in books.

Kasia smiled and asked the nice young man if he had known Melchior Weigel.

"Weigel? An older man, yes? Mostly I get students." He paused a moment to think. "Erasmus and maybe some Corvinus? But it's been some time…"

"Yes. Some time." Kasia said. "He has… The Lord has..."

"Ah. I'm sorry. So you are Kasia?"

"Yes. How…"

His smile lit a small fire in her heart. “Your husband, sometimes he would say, ah, this one is for my Kasia.”

Yes, that was Melchior, and that’s who she was, Melchior’s Kasia.

But more than just Kasia. Before marriage Katarzyna Zalasowska. After, Katarzyna Weiglowa. Now widow of Melchior Weigel, God rest his soul. To some not Weiglowa but from him, Melchiorowa. Pani Weigel to many but to family and close friends simply Kasia. Matka to Tomasz and Andrzej, babcia to her grandchildren, most recently five of them. To nephews and nieces, let us count them yes eleven, ciocia Kasia, who came to this earth sixty years before, the year that Pius cast Poland and the Teutonic Knights together, unable to negotiate a peace, into anathema.

At which King Casimir, father of our Kasia’s King Zygmunt, ordered the Pope’s legate back to Rome, *persona non grata*. Pius was not pleased. All the whole world’s Catholic countries welcome my legates into their lands, he fumed. Are you not Catholic?

Casimir turned to his legislature, the Sejm, for a response. Of course we are a Catholic country, and as you know have been these five centuries. But Catholic or not we are subjects of our King, not of a Pope. In Poland too many of your clergy enrich themselves, then indulge in one luxury after another. Perhaps the time has come for Your Holiness to put your own house in order.

As if to say to Pius yes we are Catholic, but is your Church Christian?

Only time would tell if Kasia, born into a world simmering with dissent, came among us under an auspicious star, or damned by circumstance.

Auspicious too, to be baptized Catherine, martyred by the Romans for so brilliantly defending her Christianity?

It was the question fermenting today in so many minds, of what it means to be a Christian, that brought Kasia here to the bookstalls surrounding Kraków's University.

And Melchior or no Melchior, God rest his soul, she could not let it go.

She had not forgotten it, over the years, that time when Melchior's brother Dierck and his Liesel brought their niece Magda, just twelve, to stay with them, so she might experience the city. Kasia and Melchior's church was the big St. Mary's Basilica. But sermons there were in German. So they brought Magda with them to St. Barbara's, where sermons were in Polish, a small church tucked like a chick under the brooding wing of St. Mary's. They had no way of knowing that Archbishop Konarski had commanded that Luther be condemned that day in all the diocese' churches.

Kasia watched as Magda, tucked close by her side, recoiled from the priest's words, coming at her like so many angry bees.

Then in the churchyard, after Mass, she could see that the chattering, milling crowd was pushing Magda further into a kind of emotional shell.

"Did he scare you?" Kasia smiled and asked, gently. "I mean, the priest."

Magda hung her head, stared at the ground.

"He didn't mean to scare you."

At last, little more than a whisper. "Is he a man?"

"Who, dear? Is who a man?"

Warned as a child that naming him might conjure him, Magda would not say his name. "The evil one. Is he a man?"

"No dear, the devil isn't a man."

"Is Luther a man?"

Now Kasia knew.

It was the priest's naming Luther a devil that troubled the poor girl, Liesel's first, a hard birth bringing a slow child. Now, how could she know which men, of all she met, were devils and which not?

But certainly not Melchior, who lavished his love onto the girl. After waving to a customer going into St. Mary's he turned back to them. "Come Magda, let's go home," he said, taking the girl's hand. "Ciocia Kasia's made us a nice soup."

It was only a month later that she'd found Melchior on his way to the outhouse, embracing the earth.

Melchior, oh Melchior.

A drop of rain, more, fell out of a sky clear but for a louring cloud directly above them, which with an ominous rumble suddenly sent all the booksellers into a scurry.

She had meant to take her time browsing but now found herself hurrying to find Luther's *Theses* and oh not to forget Johann Eck's *Obelisci,* Luther and Eck once friends but no longer. We must see the thing from all sides, Melchior would say. Had he learned that from his goldsmithing, studying a thing from all sides, just to be sure?

Luther's *Theses* was in German, the Eck Latin. Of course she grew up only knowing Polish, until she'd pestered her uncle Lech, a failed furrier back from Pomerania, to teach her German. That made Melchior's Silesian, when she met him, easy.

She was the kind who liked to rise to challenges. Her son Andrzej, while a half-hearted monk in the Tyniec Abbey, had planted the Latin bug in her ear. So she asked Melchior, next time he browsed the bookstalls, to bring her a Latin grammar. It was harder than German, but she would not give it up. In time she would help Melchior with the city ordinances he was asked to vote on as a city councilman. The worst were weights and measures. There was no end to the ponderous arguments they inspired over the minutest details, conjugated in the future imperative and not always regular.

New ordinances were flooding into the council, some demanding social justice, some born of disputes between the nobility and the King. All were presented, pro and con, in dense legal Latin. And some too from the new Queen Bona, busily rocking the boat or as some said, like the dragon living beneath Wawel rocking the Castle itself. Some even dared call her that, the Wawel Dragon, though none to her face.

Most of the books Kasia's hands fell on were textbooks for the University's classes: mathematics, law, medicine, philosophy, most in Latin, a few in German, a very few in Polish. Before thunder threatened a rain she'd picked up an Agricola on pedagogy, then Biernat's *Eden of the Soul*, a book Melchior had given her when it first came out a half dozen

years ago. As the first book printed in Polish it had become something of a sensation.

Every book was a doorway into a bigger world. Standing here among them she breathed a kind of deep draft of cool mountain air, the air she'd breathed when Melchior first took her to Silesia, where the sight of the snow-capped mountains flooded her heart with a sense of freedom, tugging her to new places and far-away heights. She remembered asking Melchior to hold her hand or she might go up there and never come back.

She discovered a small book by the mathematician Mikolaj Kopernik, about the minting of coins. Kopernik was a graduate of the very university whose classrooms rose behind her. Opening the book she was surprised to find along with Kopernik's essay a piece by Justus Decjusz. Decjusz, like Melchior a city councilman and member of the goldsmith's guild, had been a casket-bearer at Melchior's funeral. And here he was in print!

Then a copy of Celtis' *Amores,* a book of poems she'd given Melchior for his birthday five or was it six years ago. Though she'd stumbled over the Latin as she translated it to him by candlelight, the poems were sweet and sensual and the memory of it cast her heart into a tangle.

As a strong-willed child watching her father learning to read she could not help herself but nagged him until he taught her. And as though it was meant to be, it came to mean so much more when it was her reading that brought them together, she and Melchior. It happened on a Sunday, so many years ago, as she sat outside the church after Mass and stumbled through the

prayer-book, quietly muttering the words. She'd glanced up and there he was, smiling his broad Melchior smile. What came after came naturally, as though God had ordained it, and it was beautiful.

Though God may have ordained it she did not forget to give herself credit for the long hours over tallow lamp and candle, pestering her father until he wished he'd never given in, this learning to make sense of these odd little paper-scratchings. And it was that same prayer-book she'd prayed with over her father's deathbed, and how sweetly sad and as though ordained by God too, that the angel of death came to take him away at the very moment she closed it.

The thunder rolled again, just as her eyes landed on a play written by a woman named Roswitha, who'd died almost five hundred years before. The humanist Conrad Celtis found it in a German monastery and had it published. Its title was *Dulcitius*. As she lifted it a drop of rain, like a tear from above, fell onto its cover. She turned to a page and found the Emperor Diocletian promising three virgins, about to be burned as martyrs, that he would find them good Roman husbands if they only denied Christ.

She studied the Latin:

AGAPE: *Esto securus curarum,*
nec te gravet nostrum praeparatio nuptiarum,
quia nec ad negationem confitendi nominis,
nec ad corruptionem integritatis
ullis rebus
compelli poterimus.

Agape, that is one of the Virgins speaking…the sense is…there will be no marriage, nothing can make us deny His name or give up our…integrity. She means I suppose their virginity.

Now Diocletian tells them that it is madness to…to set aside, no to give up or throw aside *relicta vetustae*, an ancient, or no, venerable, faith for this new Christian superstition.

Now again the virgin called Agape… it means brotherly love…no, higher love than that, of the kind Jesus gives us… Agape, talking to God, Who she knows… has the power to make the flames harmless and not consume them…then Agape, insisting she is weary of the world, instead prays God to…to release their souls so they can join Him in heaven.

She flipped the pages and found the virgins *et in ignem proicite vivas*!... flung alive into the flames!

Then a soldier, amazed, reports to Diocletian that though they have burned to death they were not consumed. How can it be, he asks, to burn but not be consumed?

Then Kasia shivered unexpectedly, the hair on the back of her neck rising as a pillar of fire ascended sympathetically through her body.

Thunder, again, and closer.

She set the Celtis aside, found coins in her purse for her Luther and Eck, and hurried homeward into a growing rainfall, the heavens opening and pouring their tears over her. She slipped for a moment beneath a shop's overhang, recalling the Psalms: *Thou hast remembered the earth*, *and watered her,*

greatly enriching her, with the river of God that is full of water…softening her with showers…

Out of breath she paused to watch the river of God lave the city's streets where it ran obediently, bounded by ancient ordinance.

She tightened her shawl around her. The downpour slowed. Rivulets of muddy water hurried along their way. The sun broke through and the paving stones began to steam. The warming air, moist and sweet, brought familiar smells to her, of horse-dung, burning wood, and someone cooking: bacon, cabbage, and what was that, beets? She shivered lightly. Celtis and Luther were well and good, but always there was this putting food on the table.

Her life was different, without him. How different, she had yet to learn.

Her grandson Janek was about to become a father. His Barbara wanted her to come, before the birth. Soon she would have a great-grandchild. How quickly it all happened.

When the baby arrived, perhaps then she would go.

A cartload of potted flowers came up the way, pulled by a lone brown mare. Freshened by the shower the plants shone a brilliant green. Heartsease she recognized, the tea she made for Melchior's cough, and cowslips, already in bloom. The blossoms nodded and swayed as they bumped their way along, the heartsease like so many tiny faces in a holy day procession. The flowers of the cowslips, and the thought seemed odd to her, were like little yellow shofars pointed towards heaven, the rams' horns the rabbis blew down along the Wisła at the

holiday they called the Feast of the Trumpets. It was stunning, this blast of beauty blaring its way up the early May afternoon. Going, she knew, to Wawel, to brighten the Queen's Ascension Day.

2

Carefully observe the flame of a candle. Now blink, and look again. The flame you see was not there before, and the flame that was there is gone. Who rekindles this flame, always dying?

Leonardo da Vinci, *Paris MS*

1 May, 1519

Queen Bona Sforza, to her mother
Isabella of Aragon, Naples
1 May, 1519

Mama:
She's resting now, our Lizzie with your name and eyes. In her four months she has brought me a lifetime of joy. If only you were with us to share our happiness.

She does not sleep the night through but is a good child, as you say I was but not Francesco, God rest his soul. Some nights she is with the nurse. Others I will not share her and have her beside me. Then Zygi does not come to me and she is all mine!

She is but our first. Zygi will yet have a son. At this letter's end I give you our Lizzie's footprints so you too can kiss her sweet soft feet.

There is so much to say and not enough paper in all Poland to say it. Zygi is away so I have crossed into his territory, the room they call the Hen's Foot with its big view of the city. Here I find calm in the storm of my life.

I had so much Lizzie in my last letter I did not tell you about the anniversary Zygi made for me, our first. The night before so we could have our love we sent Lizzie to the nurse, and though I slept deeply the noise they made in the courtyard entered my dreams. When I woke Zygi took me to our window and I looked down at a rainbow of poppies, sprawled across it a thousand white anemones crying out Szczęśliwy Pierwsza Rocznica!... Happy First Anniversary!

It was so lovely I cried. All day we celebrated. First to bless our marriage a Holy Mass here at the castle, the choir from Gdansk and singing Polish hymns. One he had made specially for me and dedicated to Our Holy Mother. I wore a new dress, a deep blue weave spangled with gold, just for the occasion and mama I wish you could have seen it. After Mass we stepped into our wreathed and ribboned carriage and down the Royal Road through big crowds waving and cheering.

For our banquet there were Polish dishes and roast lamb, wild boar, capons, and some favorites of our wedding feast, if only

you were there, the pastidelle de carne, zuppa nauma, the pizze sfogliate and oh the delicious lemoncelle, and the nicest wines from Hungary and France and as far as Sicily. I told him once how even Pliny praised the wines of Puglia, where you and I shared our years, and bless his soul he managed some Colombano and even Mandurian negromaro.

Afterwards was dancing, my clumsy handsome bear of a Zgyi bravely stepping a pavane. While men from the mountains played a wild Polish dance everyone cheered him on. One squealed a bagpipe like our zampogna and it squealed so mama it hurt your ears.

You know how I love you from the depth of my heart, mama, and thank you too for teaching me in your words and your ways how to thrive in a storm or if need be stir one up. Our lives together, with Francesco and Ippolita, God rest their souls, we were always running from storms weren't we.

When Zgyi's brother Alexander was King the parliament they call the Sejm stole from him the right to act without their approval. They call it the law of nihil novi. They might as well have cut off Zygi's right arm. It makes us the laughing-stock of Europe. I cannot imagine your grandpapa Ferrante, God rest his soul, standing for such a thing. He was made of different stuff, our stuff. You would tell me how to put a scare in them he'd show them wouldn't he his museum where he kept the mummies of those who had opposed him.

They do not want me here. They want their Polish queen, fattened on Polish beer, bread and butter. Some few are on my side, many against me. I worry most about the ones who are for me are they really, or only pretending?

You remember mama after the engagement papers were signed you hired someone to teach me Polish? How I would run to you and plead, "No, mama," I would say, "please mama, find me an African king. I can grunt and whistle mama but not this Polish."

But now I begin to like it and you can send your African back to his jungle. Now I find it, in its own way, beautiful. I still take lessons and sometimes find myself thinking and even once dreaming in Polish. And to hear my ladies on their knees in their Pater Nosters, it is a rustling in the silence, the first sound the earth knew as God's hand troubled the waters.

Jan Łaski has brought Bartolomeo Berrecci to work for us, to build the Chapel where Zygi will rest forever. In Rome Berrecci learned his craft from the one they call Michelangelo, who they say has drawn God's hand and man's almost touching on the ceiling of the Cappella Sistina. Berrecci is giving us a lovely Chapel. He has made many drawings and a small model of wood. To accomplish it Zygi has hired eight Tuscan stonecutters. He had a horoscope cast and last week on a favorable day they began the foundation. Berrecci tells Zygi please don't leave us soon for it will be a very grand thing

that will make him famous across the centuries and grand things do not happen overnight.

I've already told you of my plans for Wawel castle. There was a big fire before I arrived, and they'd begun remodeling it but I put a stop to that so I could show them how to do it.

Now in the matter of your inheritance. In June they will elect a new Holy Roman Emperor. The French envoys have arrived to buy Zygi's vote for their favorite, their own Francis. They had no luck matching his son the Dauphin with Henry of England's daughter Mary, so now they mean to match him with our Lizzie. I look down at her sweet innocent face as you must have looked down at mine and am astonished and proud too that kings joust over her little hand, the one she grasps my finger with and holds on for dear life. By his victory at Marignano Francis has won Milan. If Lizzie is indeed engaged to his son then perhaps Milan will once again be ours.

It is said Spain's Hapsburg Charles is most likely to be elected Emperor. His Holiness has offered Zygi two hundred thousand to vote for Charles. It's all such a tangle, and so much hanging on it. Zygi's favorite is his nephew Louis. Charles is his last choice. I would not trust Charles for a day. Elected he will turn his back on you and I and all our inheritance will be lost.

Zygi has sent his lawyer Dantyszek, the one who first came to you to bargain for my hand, to Barcelona to argue our case, but I do not trust him either. He is in Zygi's hand, not ours.

He, Dantyszek I mean, writes that Charles bragged to him of speaking Spanish to God, Italian to women, French to men and German to his horses. As for me I use German on the burghers, Latin for the bishops, Italian on my cooks, and Polish for Zygi's cooks, and mama you should see the fights mine and his stir up in the kitchen.

Meanwhile offers arrive to buy Jadwiga's hand, Zygi's daughter by Barbara, his first Queen. As for her, dead now four years and left her smell behind, it's Barbara this, Barbara that, Barbara all day long. She was much loved here, such a sweet thing, more lamb than I can manage. Zygi goes into a crying fit at the mention of her name.

And still the wolves circle. Moscow and now with them the Knights, howling to us to give back lands they claim as theirs. The Russians, always ready to pounce, nearly took Polotsk until the ghost of Zygi's brother Casimir showed our army where to cross the river to attack. I am told His Holiness has appointed a delegation to beatify Casimir.

The Hapsburgs and the Turks too do not stop harrying our borders. Our envoys in Istanbul hope to gain the Sultan's help in winning Smolensk from the Russians. And now the Tatars have come in through the backdoor by way of Moldava. Like the torments of Sisyphus there is no end to it. Zygi says as they did to Christ they would hang Poland on the cross and play dice over our garments.

I thank God we have here now some spring and warmer days. I am not a winter wolf. I long for Naples. Even Milan would be a reprieve. And I worry about Lizzie, the castle is so cold. To these people it is nothing, though in Campagna's heat they would surely wilt.

The Cathedral and the Castle grounds are being decorated for Ascension Day. Such a profusion of flowers will fill the church that when Konarski sings his High Mass he will transport us almost to Heaven. I remember now dear mama how your eyes would light up and your heart take flight when you told us of the lovely decorations Leo made for you, and especially for your wedding.

It was from Berrecci we learned of Leo's going. I cried and cried. May our hearts never be so hardened we cannot cry. The earth will not see another like him. You loved him as you loved no other, mama, and he loved you, and now through him your face will live across the ages.

We are left now only with his paintings, and our memories. When he was painting his mulberries on the walls of the Sale della Asse for Uncle Ludovico, may his soul burn in Hell, I was but a child and called up to him Leo! Leo! and he came down from his ladder to paint my face like a cat's, to make me a Leo too, and I would not let you wipe it off. I remember you and I walking hand in hand from the Corte Vecchia apartment we shared with him to the Santa Maria church to watch him paint

Christ's Last Supper and I would call out to him Leo! It's me! and he would turn and smile the sweetest smile.

I remember too how he would tell a joke, sometimes smutty but always funny, to remind himself what laughter looked like, then sketch it in his notebook. He tickled me once to giggle and when on quiet cat's-feet I padded into his room I found him sketching a giggling me.

And the heavenly sound of his lyre spilling from our windows. I am crying now, mama, do you see the teardrops on the paper, he has been taken from us. Only because of him you smiled and laughed and, yes because of him you had your hot baths, he was so clever, and I've never known you to be so happy except with him, mama. He is no longer ours, mama, now he belongs to God, and the world.

Your Bona,

and little Lizzie.

3

5 September, 1521

It is madness to think that reason
can touch the Eternal Spheres, and
understand Three Persons in One.
Be satisfied, people, you know enough!
Dante Alighieri,
Purgatorio Canto III

A membrane had torn. Kasia's life, clearly not hers to direct, was busily being born. She was, as some would say, *entre chien et loup*, between the dog and the wolf.

She dealt with each day's challenges intelligently and efficiently, as was her way. But the landscape she found herself in was one she'd never traveled before and while one day might seem crafted by an unseen hand to comfort her, the next would be so chaotic she had to pick herself up and start over.

He had always been there, Melchior, but now across the membrane he was little more than a cipher. Still she found what comfort from him she could, from the image of him she tried to call back as it receded over the horizon. Their lives together, clearly not theirs to direct, were as some would say, *entre chien et loup*.

Breakfast was warming on the stove. As she leaned to stir the fire an ember leapt suddenly onto her hand. She brushed it away but it left behind an insistent, sharp pain. She dipped her hand into cold water. The pain subsided. Holding it submerged she surveyed the room. It needed tidying.

On a high shelf she caught sight of the Luther and Eck she'd bought two years before. She'd given up on them. It wasn't the German or the Latin. It was deeper than that. It was how they insisted she abandon simple faith to follow them across a border into a landscape of tangled theological arguments, the same arguments literally stirring up fires across the world. Recently it was said the bishops of Kamieniec and Chełm, on the King's orders, fed big fires outside their churches with Luther's works; until, that is, a crowd gathered to pelt the bishops with rocks.

As the throbbing in her hand subsided she shook Luther and Eck from her mind, spooned out a bowlful of porridge, edged her old legs beneath a bench and sat. Slowly, mouthful by mouthful the porridge cut her hunger.

But the porridge, thick and rich with new cream and sweetened with this year's honey was not enough to hold her mind, which flamed into anger at a Church too full of itself, an anger which settled inside her and for a time became her. Anger at the thought that the one thing that might keep Melchior from heaven was his resentment of the bishop's opulent vestments and towering monstrances, some made in his own shop, heavy with gold and silver and studded with expensive gems.

And the selling of indulgences, the ones Luther railed against. It is only the Pope's claim, it is nowhere in the Bible, Melchior would say, that when the coins clink into the offering the soul escapes purgatory.

As she pushed her empty bowl aside a sudden breeze rattled the windowpane and beyond it shook the fall's first leaves off Melchior's pear. Yesterday she'd noticed the tree's fruits lying on the ground, wasps arguing over them as though chiding her for not rescuing them into a compote. It seemed then that even the tree, unpruned since Melchior's passing, was shaking its finger at her and threatening to go wild, from dog to wolf.

The days were shorter, the nights colder, the earth turning towards darkness, a darkness she felt more deeply now that she walked it alone.

Perhaps, she thought, if I asked Tomasz he would prune the tree. Then she remembered with a start that Tomasz and the men from Wieliczka were coming to clean out the workshop.

As a young apprentice Melchior learned goldsmithing in Marcin Marcienic's workshop, where he worked alongside the craftsmen who created the city's most cherished reliquary, the elegant casket for the martyr Saint Stanislaus' head. After serving as a journeyman Melchior became a master goldsmith then opened his own shop.

That first shop was a shed set far enough back to keep the kiln's sparks from landing on the roof of their house. As his business prospered and the children came they moved into this

house on Szewska, where Melchior built a new and larger shop. In a short while his pieces found their way into the Bishop's Palace, Wawel Castle, and some of the city's finest houses, some even as far away as Gniezno, Gdansk, Torun and Nuremburg. And reliquaries, Torah crowns and circumcision bowls from his or his workers' hands could be found in the synagogues of Kraków's mostly Jewish suburb Kazimierz.

Along the way Kasia and Melchior were blessed with five children. Elizabeth died at birth. Agnieska and Marya were taken away by a plague, as toddlers. The pain of their loss never left her. The boys, first Tomasz then Andrzej, different as they were, played and grew up together. It was Melchior's hope that Tomasz would carry on the business, but he chose to apprentice as a carpenter. Melchior never quite got over that. Andrzej had neither talent nor interest for handwork. He tried law school at the University, then after sitting in on a theology class announced he would enter the city's Franciscan monastery. His letters suggested he was growing tired of that too.

It seemed almost a lifetime ago, watching all the beautiful pieces flowing from the workshop. It *was* a lifetime ago, Melchior's. After the funeral Jan Boner, like Melchior a councilman, wrote her to let her know he knew someone in Wieliczka who might be interested in buying the workshop's stock and equipment. As administrator of the King's mines, including the cash-cow salt mines around Wielickzka, Boner had become one of Europe's richest men.

For a while there were still orders to fill and a few new ones coming in, enough to keep a reduced crew busy. She kept her hand in it, making sure the work was done to Melchior's standards. The small profit from the orders augmented the pension the goldsmith's guild provided her. She did not lack on that side of things.

But the time had come to move on. She wrote Boner, who replied that yes his friend was still interested. She had the contents of the shop appraised, a price was agreed on, and this piece of Melchior's life would soon no longer be theirs, or hers.

Melchior died in the middle of an order from a regular customer, Mosche Fiszel. The Fiszels were Kazimierz' power family, with deep connections to the monarchy up in Wawel. When Zygmunt's father King Casimir needed a loan to finance one of his wars he turned to Mosche's aunt Rachele. To return the favor he gave Rachele permission to live in a neighborhood of Kraków forbidden to most Jews. When one of Mosche's nephews took on the name Stefan Powidzki and converted to Christianity Zygmunt rewarded him by making him a nobleman. The King's own mother, the dowager queen Elizabeth, had been godmother to the Powidzki children.

When Zygmunt welcomed the Jews from Prague, who were suffering another pogrom, they settled in Kazimierz. But this brought the Fiszels new challenges. Should the newcomers be granted seats in the Kazimierz Jews' council, the *kehillah*? Should they be given permission to hold their own services in the new synagogue? If so when, and how much should they contribute?

It's what brought Mosche to the Weigels not long before Melchior died. Mosche meant to settle the question of priority in the synagogue by financing a new pair of gold Torah crowns, the ends of the rollers which held the parchment Torah. He came to the Weigels with sketches of what he wanted. Melchior took the job but asked that Mosche contact Jan Boner for the virgin gold they would need, gold certified as never used in a crucifix or chalice.

A week or so after Melchior's funeral Kasia asked Szymon, the workshop's master smith, to see her. Szymon showed her what orders still needed filling, including the Torah crowns. He asked her if he should advertise for new orders. She paused a moment. No, she said. When he asked if he should accept new orders from current customers she paused again. Yes, she said, that would be fine. It would provide work for her employees until they found new positions. By now they'd moved on, all orders were filled and she could put that part of her, their, life behind her.

She rinsed her breakfast bowl with water warmed on the big tile stove of the kind found mostly in the homes above her class. It was a gift from Melchior, who was very proud of it. Before heading out into the cool morning and the workshop whose kilns were now grown cold she pulled a heavy shawl around her shoulders.

The night before was cold and windy. The leaves that had fallen from the oaks and fruit trees crunched quietly underfoot, the faint odor of their decay rising gently to her consciousness.

From a neighbor's roof a raven eyed her, cawed nonchalantly, lifted off into the breeze and disappeared behind the spire of St. Anne's.

She turned the key in the shop's lock and pushed the door open. Months had passed since she'd last opened it. The air inside felt nippy, uninviting, the bitter tang of coal fires still hanging in the air. It was Melchior's smell, the smell he brought with him into the house, a smell which had seeped so deeply into his skin that only after his infrequent baths did it lose its bite. Every day but Sundays they woke in the predawn light to the creaking of the outside gate when Melchior's fireman came to light and tend the fire. First the creaking gate, then a low growl and a spasm of barks before Burek recognized the fireman.

"Already?" Melchior would sigh, turning in bed. "Again?"

Reaching under the thick goose down pierzyna Melchior's mother had given them he'd lay a hand on Kasia's breast and rest it there, lightly, as a fallen leaf might lie on a sleeping cat. "The day once was," he'd told her only weeks before he died, "at this hour you'd have gotten me busy making more Weigels."

She smiled then, to herself. Yes, the day once was. And they had.

Then to let her know he still cared he would squeeze her breast gently before slipping out from the pierzyna to dress and mutter something about a council meeting or, in a better mood, hum a song he'd overheard at work or in the tavern.

As she stepped into the workshop these smell-spawned memories flooded into her, putting her one foot in her past life, one in the future*, entre chien et loup.*

When the men from Wieliczka came Tomasz helped them load the workshop's innards into wooden boxes and crates and tote them out to the waiting horse-cart. It took almost no time to gut the workshop, a lifetime gone in minutes. The boxes filed past her out the door, heaped with tongs, hammers, chisels, touchstones, cruets, saws, files, and engraver's burins. The niello, a black mineral inlay used to set off gems or silver, passed by in a smaller box. In drawers stacked one atop another hundreds of shards of colored enameling glass, carefully sorted by color, paraded past her. There were little leather packages of gold pins and leaf, silver and gold wire for filigree, and drawers rich with an assortment of gemstones: amber, rubies, sapphires, pearls.

Over the years on a Sunday afternoon when the workshop was empty Kasia would sometimes let herself in and spill the gemstones into her hand. Tiny as they were, carefully held between a thumb and finger they turned ordinary daylight into beautiful droplets of color: the soft comforting glow of amber, opalescent cloudy pearls, or the fire leaping out of the finest rubies, the ones called pigeon's blood. Bright little doorways opening into a simpler, purer world, outside the vicissitudes of time.

A prime target for thieves, they kept the workshop carefully locked, with Burek as extra protection. When he first brought him home Melchior told her the big mastiff's growl

was loud enough to put a scare into St. George. And there did come nights they awakened to that growl, turned over and thanks to Burek fell back asleep.

Tomasz handed her a small box he'd found far back in a drawer. She held it a moment, curiously. Though not opened for many years the lid came off easily. Inside she found a neatly folded piece of parchment. She handed the box to Tomasz and unfolded the paper, exposing a small silver ring. She picked it up and studied it.

Then suddenly it came to her. The ring she held had belonged to Melchior's mother. She smiled as the story tumbled back into her memory, and to her and Tomasz's surprise tears flowed down her cheeks. She turned and found a bench to sit on.

Tomasz stood beside her, hand on her shoulder, as forty years of marriage to a good man and all the days of their lives together burst out in a fountain of sorrow and, beneath it, a full realization of the gift God had granted her in her husband and their long, rich life together.

At last she dried her tears and stood and took Tomasz' hand.

"It was your grandmother's ring," she said, the tears threatening again. "Your grandfather was so proud of it."

"Did he make it?"

"Yes, of course. When they married they were too poor to afford a ring. When they decided to move to Kraków he promised to give her the first ring he made. This one."

She held it and admired it then handed it to Tomasz.

"They were still poor, at first, but he managed to put his hands on enough silver to cast it, and as your father told it to me, before casting it your grandfather added what he called 'the blood of my heart,' a single scruple of gold."

The ring went back into its box, to be kept and treasured far beyond Kasia's, and Tomasz', time.

The workbenches were almost empty. She retrieved a rabbit's foot, used to put the final polish on a piece, and as he passed by dropped it into the last crate Tomasz was lugging out to the cart.

Now the workshop stood cold and bare. It echoed every footfall, almost every breath. Its walls were emptied of the familiar tools they once held, the benchtops were clean and barren, the chimneys without their furnaces standing as lonely sentinels of a time gone past. Kasia felt the tug of memories being uprooted, as though the memories too were leaving. She walked out the workshop door and wondered if she would ever enter it again.

The cart pulled away towards Wieliczka. She handed Tomasz the key to the workshop. Their eyes met. Together they felt the moment's significance. Even Burek, standing beside her, seemed to know something was going on. She bent down and patted the dog's head. She started along the path to the house, the crisp crunch of the leaves underfoot providing yet another commentary on her place in life. The key turned in the shop's door behind her, and Tomasz' footsteps followed.

She threw wood in the stove and sat silently at the kitchen table.

Tomasz sat too. For a while only the sound of the fire in the stove catching hold cut through the silence. With his own hands Tomasz' father had built the workshop, furnished it with benches and tables, and over the years in his meticulous way carefully collected the metals, gems and other materials he needed and made, and bought one by one each of the tools they'd just said goodbye to. Another membrane torn, another door closed.

For a few days after Melchior's death the chairs they sat on had been turned upside down so his soul, wanting so badly to stay with her, would find no comfort. All the house's mirrors had been draped with black cloths, so not only his soul but even its reflection could escape. Silly superstitions, he would have said, yet she gave in to them. And sadly, they seemed to have worked, for the time had come when her loneliness was so deep she felt even his soul had gone from her.

A thin steam began to rise lightly from the pot of milk kept warm on the stove. She shuffled her way to it, poured a cup and one for her son. She cut two thick pieces of bread then set on them big slices of a cheese she'd brought home from the Rynek.

They sat at the table, wrapped in the fire's warmth. The bread was good but her old teeth made the chewing of it hard work.

Tomasz, who worked as a carpenter and had built his own house in Rakowice, north of the city, wanted her to come live with him. Helen would be happy to have you, he said. You could help with the children. She'd given it some thought but there was something in her that wanted to fly free, to find

another self or selves she hadn't yet created. She needed some time alone, and she'd heard of far too many mothers moving in and relationships gone bad. Thanks to Melchior's business she could afford to choose.

"And this?" Tomasz asked, nudging the bag of coins they'd traded for the shop's contents.

She swallowed her bread. "I don't know. I still owe some for the funeral, and the burial plot."

Over the years Melchior made many friends in wide social circles. Given the choice he would have had a small service up in Silesia where he'd grown up, then into the ground alongside his father and grandfather. But the goldsmiths guild, which helped with the funeral costs and provided her a small pension, talked her into a more elaborate service at the Basilica and burial at Kazimierz' Corpus Christi. Though she'd given in to them she was never quite sure she'd done the right thing.

During the service for Melchior she'd sat stoically in the cavernous, echoing nave of the Basilica, still in shock and though both their families, close and extended, filled the pews around her, feeling deeply alone. The Mass for the Dead was supposed to help but there was a kind of film, like that left on the glass of milk she held, between her and the liturgy. Together she and Melchior had stepped out from under the canopy of the Church until what it was and what it meant seemed an emptier and emptier glass. Yes the plainchant was beautiful; yes the stained glass reflected another, more timeless world where, who knows, Melchior might already have settled; yes the rich, sweet smell of the incense would creep inside her

and center her in her body, and yes the swish of the priest's garments and muttered Latin were still utterly familiar and comforting, yet in spite of all that it seemed the heart had been yanked out of it. Like the longing to return to the innocence of childhood, she longed sometimes for the faith of the simple farm-girls who filled the country's smaller churches day after day. If like them she could just simply believe. Yes, it was the simplicity she'd lost, without hardly noticing.

"And the shop?" Tomasz interrupted her thoughts, "You could rent it you know."

"Yes maybe. I hadn't thought of that."

"Do you mean to stay? I mean, here?"

She looked out the window. A flock of a dozen or so storks flew past, out of the hundreds that made their nests on the city's rooftops and chimneys, primal creatures from another time, on their way out of this darkening land growing daily colder, as though flying away with a part of her life.

"I don't know. Mosche said he can find me a smaller place, in Kazimierz. The rent would be very little."

Tomasz breathed in, exhaled. "Mother! I know they've been nice to you, and they were your friends, and father's too, but…"

"Tomasz," she said, looking him in the eyes. "They gave us a lot of business, always paid on time and were always there to help when we needed something. As customers, well, they treated us better than many of …of our own kind."

Our kind! But she wasn't *our kind* anymore, was she?

"But to move there, right in the middle of…"

"Middle of what? Go ahead and say it, Tomasz, as long as you're thinking it, in the middle of the Jews." He started to interrupt but she wouldn't let him. "Many of whom, you know as well as I do, were born right here on this street, our neighbors. They were your friends and grew up alongside you. Then they got blamed for the big fire of course they didn't have anything to do with it, everyone knew that, but anyway the King's brother," she nodded in the direction of the Castle, "the big guy up there, gave in to the pressure and kicked them all out, to Kazimierz. We watched them go didn't we, loading their wagons with everything they owned, one family after another, off to a new life whether they wanted or not." She paused for breath. He was astonished at the strength of her feelings, as though he'd set a match to kindling and ignited a small holocaust.

"Anyway," she caught control of herself, "I'm not going to the middle of them. Just Kazimierz, that's all. And not everyone there, you know, is…," her eyes accusing him of what she did not need to say.

"It'll put me closer to your father, God rest his soul." She looked past Tomasz out the window, towards where Melchior lay underground. "Besides," she finally added. "I'm not really sure."

"Not sure about what? Moving?"

Their glasses and plates were empty. She brought more milk from the stove. "No, not about that. There's no reason for me to stay here, by myself." She stood sipping her milk beside the window, through which the sun poured what little warmth

it could still muster. "I don't know about when, or where, but I'll move."

For a while all was quiet. Though she was getting used to that, the quiet, a part of her did not find it comforting. Outside Burek set up an admonitory growl, as though complaining about the changes they were all going through. Burek. Yes, she wouldn't take him with her. Another thing to do.

Tomasz set his cup down, slid his chair back and stood.

"Dziękuję, Tomasz." She took his hand and looking up – how long ago he'd outgrown her, and now year by year she withered even more – reminded him how glad she was he lived nearby and helped out at times like this. "And somehow I think your father," she said, who'd had his moments with Tomasz, as fathers do, "is glad you're here too."

Tomasz pursed his lips. "Maybe. But he's gone, mother, and you must get used to that." She dropped his hand, wanted to say something but he wouldn't let her. "Have you ever thought, and don't get me wrong it's just something to think about, since you won't come live with us, maybe it's time to find some, well some other man?"

She turned away from him. Think of? Of course, and though she hadn't told her boys, they'd come buzzing around her like flies at a carcass, these other men. How could she not think of it?

"No. Not now. Not yet. That's for another time, Tomasz, or maybe never," she said quietly, turned and raised herself to put a light kiss on his cheek. "Now go home to your family."

She watched him disappear up the street with the same easy graceful strides as Melchior had. He was far from a duplicate,

but neither was he a stranger. Time as time does had torn her children from her but left her the consolation of admiring them for who they'd become, choosing in their own way to take, or leave behind, the stuff of life their parents had handed them.

She sat again, closed her eyes, let the warmth emanating from the stove's tiles and the south window seep into her, and like gold or silver dropped into the workshop's furnaces, melt her into a new shape, a new self, which would be who she would be tomorrow and the day after that and the day after that, until another newness came, God willing.

She would change, as we all do, and she would stay who she was, as we all do.

In some ways she was still the little Kasia the stork had dropped into a nest of six siblings on a small farm outside Bielany. A lovely infant, sincerely admired by everyone, family or not, who grew into a bright-eyed and spirited child, then a beautiful young woman, lodestone to a dozen lads' affections. Now over sixty she was still good-looking. She'd inherited her father's thin, energetic body which she inhabited with his same natural grace and confidence. Her eyes were her mother's, as were her fine, soft skin and a personality no one ever seemed to tire of. Men, she discovered to her own surprise, found her equally intimidating and alluring. Melchior was the first, and the last, to stride right smack into her, allured yes but no more intimidated than he'd have been by an apple tree needing pruning, a boulder to heave out of the garden, or a delicate reliquary needed smithing.

She was full of a kind of energy which bounced around inside her and threatened sometimes to dance her right off the floor. And she was frustrated by how hard it was for her as a woman to find an outlet for her energies. It was so much easier for men. If Melchior had not discovered her, she sometimes mused, she might have fit a milkmaid's life, the kind of simple woman she saw sometimes at the market square, come to town to sell cheeses or to shop for their master's groceries, or standing wide-eyed in the crowds gathered along the Royal Road to watch a coronation or victory parade, amazed at how the other side lives. Unschooled, they stumbled over their one language, not her three or four, and faced short, mostly difficult lives lived out in close horizons. But they seemed, most of them, full of hearty energy and often laughed and clapped each other on the shoulder in ways respectable Kasia could not, full of wonder at the sights Kraków offered them, which to her were just the backdrop to her everyday life.

When she and Melchior danced, at a wedding or a gathering in the guild's hall, she would enter another world, where she could finally draw from the wells of innate grace deep in her body. What a good thing it was that Melchior liked to dance. Some, like the chodzony, were calm and elegant. In these she filled her eyes and the small, quiet gestures of her hands with longing and flirtation. Others, like the oberek and how she loved the new fad passing through town, the krakówiak, were fires you danced in, your spirit rising like sparks into a wonderful place you didn't know your heart could find. As partners she and Melchior fit one another so well, turned and bowed and spun together so well they could feel the

joy in their hearts and revel too in sharing it with onlookers. Sometimes she thought, when I too am dead and gone, they will remember us, dancing.

Now he was gone but the times sometimes came when she could no longer ignore the music rising from the fiddles and drums stored away in her heart, and talking her stiff and aching legs into a small yet graceful shuffle she would dance a gift to them both.

He was a good man, Melchior, not a perfect man. She wasn't so foolish to think he was perfect. Sometimes, and yes too often for her liking, he seemed lost in his own world, a world so hard to reach she often simply gave up trying. He could be curt, yes, too ready to cut off a conversation and move on to another before he'd let the first ripen. He liked his drink, but not too much, and he gave her a gift not many of her friends were given: the simplicity and honesty of his love meant she had no worries about other women.

Most of the time Melchior's broad ruddy face was locked in a laugh or a smile, an expressive face that could transform in an instant from contemplating with obvious annoyance the implications of ancient Magdeburg laws on modern city ordinances to a sudden loud and heartfelt, "Kasia, what a good wife you are!"

They both loved to read, when they found the time, and both loved exploring the landscape of big ideas. Though he might share with her the joy of a big commission or the frustration of having to let a clumsy, careless apprentice go, mostly he kept his work to himself. His designs in gold and

silver expressed his gift for finding a simple, straightforward solution to the form and function equation. He insisted that every piece be made to his trademark quality, and the moment a piece walked out of the workshop it was worth more than he'd sold it for.

He moved through life, in short, with a kind of child-like grace and simplicity, which she admired from the moment they met to the very end. In time she came to realize it was because of his faith.

More a faith in himself than a faith in God, or anyway the God they called down on Sundays and Holy Days into the Basilica. They both admired the artistry of the Veit Stoss altar, the intricate craftsmanship on display in sculptures of Mary, Joseph and the Saints set into their niches, or the play of light on the gold and marble of the side Chapels, but they'd come to agree it wasn't the beauty of the place that brought God down among them. If God was to be there, they decided, He was to be found in their hearts. They brought Him with them when they walked in through the Basilica's heavy oak doors, and He came with them as they walked out.

Was the God the priest called down at the altar the same God they carried in their hearts? That was a question not long before he died she and Melchior had taken the first guarded steps towards answering.

Future historians will surely look back at our times as interesting and dangerous. So it was during Europe's Reformation, when a curious and courageous old widow brings Poland's Queen Bona Sforza to a moral tipping point.

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