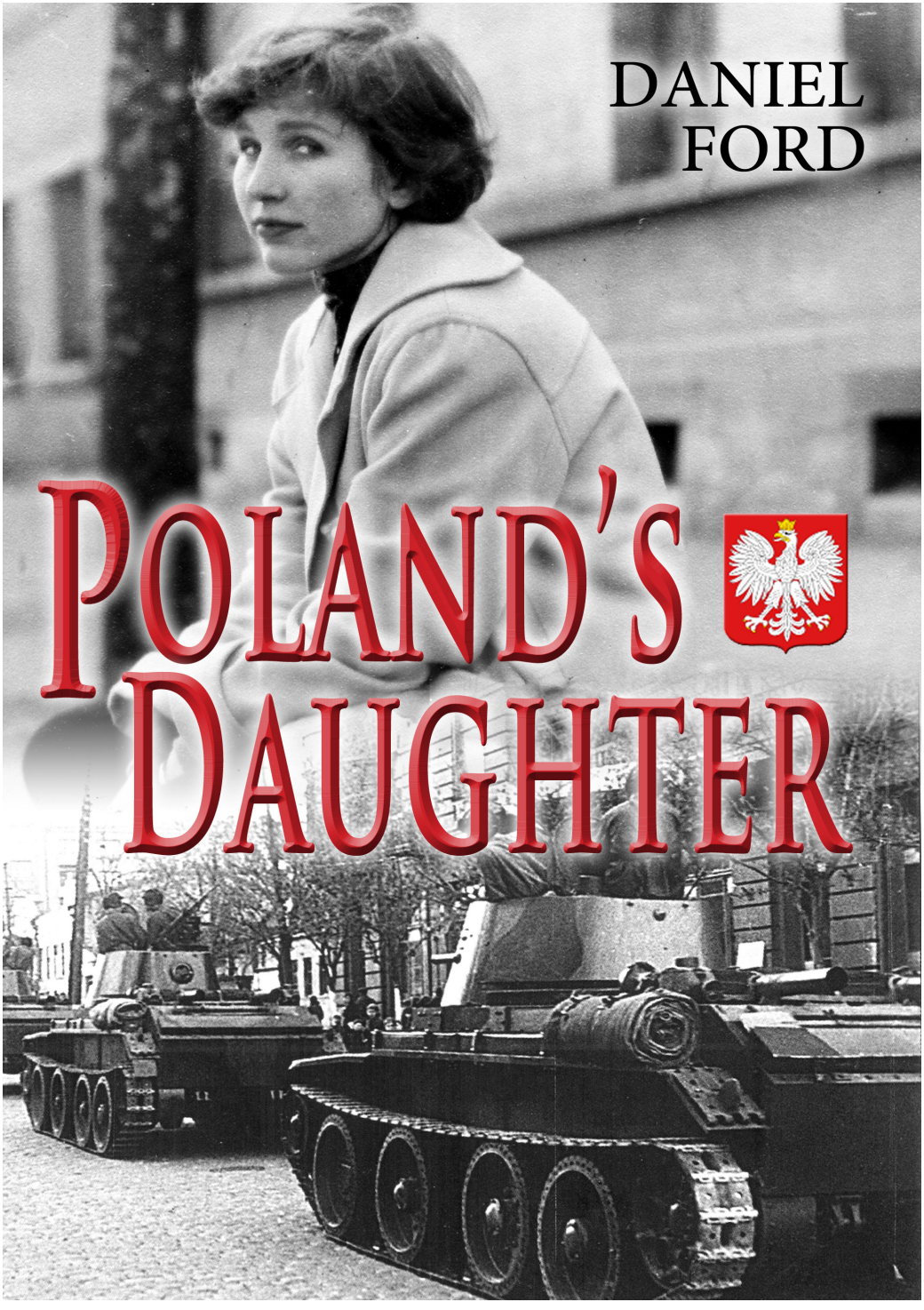
DANIEL
FORD
POLAND'S
DAUGHTER

High Praise for Poland's Daughter

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" **What is so impressively shown in these pages** is the ability to rise above adversity . . . his family moving from one small town to another looking for work; her family forced to move through Europe and the Middle East for political reasons. The grim backgrounds of the two students are made known gradually as [they] happily hitchhike from London to Italy." – *Amazon.com*

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"*This is a beautifully written book . . . all history should be like this**." – *Goodreads

On September 1, 1939, Hitler's forces stormed into Poland from the north, west, and south, followed on September 17 by Stalin's Red Army from the east. They divided the country between them, while 43,000 Poles escaped to Romania to continue their fight in French or British uniform.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Road to Italy
1955

ON SATURDAY MORNING, April 9, we shouldered our rucksacks, shook hands with Gordon Olson, and walked to the Porte d'Italie. It was a fine day, cool and sunny. Basia wore her duffle coat, while I closed and buttoned the lapels of my jacket. The great thing about that Harris tweed was that it so readily became an outdoor coat. It could even withstand a light rain, of the sort that went along with urban life in England. (We had no rain gear with us, as if we knew that foul weather couldn't possibly trouble us – and it didn't.)

A few hundred meters down the Avenue d'Italie, we found a spot with good sight lines and room for a car to pull over without blocking traffic. "This will work," I promised, putting down my rucksack and holding up my open palm, as Gordon had instructed us. The American thumb-jerk, he said, might offend Europeans.

Sure enough, in a very few minutes we caught our first ride in a gray Citroën *Deux Chevaux* with a canvas top that could be rolled back, the way you'd open a can of sardines. Basia sat in front and charmed the driver in what seemed to be flawless French. I sat mute in back with the rucksacks, knees against my chest. I was entranced to see that the gear shifter was located on the dashboard, a curved handle that seemed to have a limitless number of positions. (Only four, as I now know. The impression of multiple gears probably came from the driver's constant shifting of what amounted to a nine-horsepower motorcycle engine.) The Deux Chevaux carried us just far enough to put us in the countryside. The driver left us on a long, straight, tree-lined stretch of highway while he turned off on a gravel road. "What were you talking about?" I asked.

"All about his wonderful automobile," Basia said. "The queue to buy one is five years, but he could jump ahead because he is a farmer."

"What else?" I planned to master the language by first getting the gist of things, then sorting out the words.

"The next town is Fontainbleau." I loved the way she said it, the "u" soaring to the sky, or so it seemed to me. I had her repeat the name until I could more or less pronounce it the same way. Then a delivery van picked us up and took us not only to Fontainbleau but a kilometer or two beyond.

South of the city, we put down our rucksacks and faced the traffic. The day was warming up, and we were comfortable in the shade of a tree. Rather than the spreading elms of New Hampshire, these were tall, tailored Lombardy poplars, all the same height, same shape, and spaced at an identical distance, on both sides of the road. We were now on National Route 6, the road signs alternating between *Rue de Paris* and the more thrilling *Route d'Italie*. I could have whooped for joy. I was hitchhiking through France with the girl I loved! We were on our way to Italy!

The rides came quickly, in miniature cars and luxurious ones, and once or twice in an intercity truck with a pot-bellied driver, dribbling ashes onto his sleeveless undershirt from a Gaulois stuck to the corner of his mouth. In the afternoon we were picked up by a handsome Chevrolet convertible, a land yacht that could have stowed a Deux Chevaux in its trunk. It belonged to an American couple, students at the University of Burgundy in Dijon. Basia and I spread ourselves and our packs along the back seat, of sumptuous red leather and wide enough to furnish a country-house parlor. "Dan's an American too!" Basia volunteered, to encourage the ritual exchange of home states. And when they left us off, she said: "Before I met you, I thought all Americans were like that automobile, big and rich and noisy." Which I took as a great compliment.

What a happy day that was, from Paris to Fontainbleau, Yonne, and the wonderfully named Châlon-sur-Saône! Basia too was thrilled by the progress we were making, the ease of it, and the excitement of wondering what our next ride would be like:

I'd had no experience in that sort of travel. I'd seen some beautiful things – the Cedars of Lebanon, and the mosque in

Damascus, the beach in Beirut, the bazaar in Tehran – and met charming people. But mostly it was poverty and the heavy iron-studded gates of the convent schools. I hadn't even seen much of London at that time.

During those few weeks we lived in an unknown territory. Every crossing of the border was an exciting experience. We enjoyed the truck drivers and the insouciant way they drove. For me, any car which took us was a luxury, and the proud drivers were endearing.

You noticed Europe's poverty and the scars of the War. For me, it was rich beyond belief. And both of us were enthralled by its glory. At that time also there were many more open spaces in Europe, and many more differences between countries.

Yes. Everything was different. In the 1950s, every country boasted its own automobiles, currency, clothing, and food. As for open space, I find that most of the towns we visited have since tripled in population; they have sprawled into the countryside and been bisected and bracketed with superhighways.

Seriously, Dan, traveling with you to Italy is one of my happiest memories. I was exhilarated. I was free, I had good company, there were so many things to see. On Sundays, the bells were ringing but with great satisfaction and a little guilt, I didn't go to church. A manifestation of rebellion, I suppose. I also had a feeling of doing something not "done," and you were my collaborator. That added to my excitement.

IT WAS DUSK WHEN WE were left off in downtown Lyon, having covered 500 kilometers since breakfast. This time it was I who accosted the nearest pedestrian: "*Excusez-moi, m'sieur, où est l'auberge de jeunesse, s'il vous plaît?*" He instructed us (instructed Basia, actually, since I could parrot the question but, like the parrot, couldn't understand the reply) to cross the river and follow the east bank north. We would pass the university in a few kilometers, he said, and the hostel was just beyond.

This we did, strolling beneath the trees on a riverside promenade. A trolley rattled past with *Université* on its signboard, but neither of us made a move to hail it. Night had fallen, and the street lamps on the far bank were doubled by their reflection in the water. On our side of the river, the lamps were bright enough to light our way, yet not so bright that they dimmed the stars. The Saône seemed to radiate warmth to us, but I suspect that

what we felt was actually a breeze from the Mediterranean. Whatever caused it, the evening was *balmy*, as if we were sailing through a tropical night. Coming off six months in the soot, fog, and chill of Manchester, I felt as though my body were thawing and the once-sluggish blood was surging through my veins.

I was happier that evening, walking along the Saône, than ever before in my life. The young woman beside me was of course a very large part of that. I knew, as surely as I'd known anything in my young life, that I would kiss Basia on the mouth before the night was much older. I stole side-glances at her lips, as at *La Strada* a few weeks earlier: I could almost taste them!

I HAVE BEEN AT SUCH PAINS to describe my pretty companion that perhaps it's time to turn my gaze inward. Normally this is a difficult chore, especially for a writer looking at his much younger self, but I once took a walk-on role in one of my novels, so I have something to quote. The character was called What's-his-face, showing that by this time I was more influenced by *Catch 22* than by *Portrait of the Artist*. (The hero was still called Stephen, though his family name had morphed into something more Irish.) This is how Major Barker saw What's-his-face: "The new clerk-typist was a tall, thin private first class with a triangular face and a gigantic pair of spectacles, the kind with brown-black frames and little silver doohickeys beside the hinges. Fruit glasses, the Major called them."

Though this deals with my later involuntary service in the U.S. Army, it's a fair description of the young man who accompanied Basia to Italy in April 1955. I was wearing the identical glasses, in fact.

And serious? Oh my goodness. "In his heart," Major Barker mused of the new clerk-typist, "that bespectacled fruit thinks he's Secretary of Defense." Which is indeed the impression I get when I look at photos of my youthful self. As an old man, I often catch myself capering with happiness when I would be better off borrowing some of that youthful gravitas. In exchange, I'd give the solemn lad of 1955 a heartier sense of humor. Things might have turned out better at the hostel in Lyon, that balmy night on

the east bank of the Saône.

I don't remember the details, and if Basia does, she won't share them with me. But from a letter I afterward wrote to friends and family at home, I find that we walked for an hour along the river, that the distance was six kilometers, and that the hostel when we reached it was empty except for a Scotsman and five German journeymen with their toolboxes, black hats, bell-bottom trousers, and fancy waistcoats. The letter, alas, is purged of romance: I mention Basia only as a linguist and maker of sandwiches.

Curiously, I don't remember the sandwiches! I thought we simply tore off bits of bread and cheese, and ate them in alternation. I do know that after supper we went out to look at the stars, that I pressed my luck too hard, and that I was firmly put down. Oh yes, and I clearly remember Basia's final declaration: "And I don't like it when you put your hand on my *pupka!*"

Which is how I learned my first word of Polish, the fond term that mothers use when referring to a baby's bottom.

TO MAKE MATTERS WORSE, next day was Easter Sunday, a fact that (like the Alps) had escaped our attention when plotting our route on that BP map of Western Europe. The French of 1955 were as Catholic as the Poles, or the Irish, when it came to lining up for the Communion wafer – "making your Easter duty," as my mother called it. As a result, there were precious few motorists leaving Lyon that morning.

We'd expected to hitchhike over the Col du Mont Cenis on Monday, crossing into Italy and sleeping in Turin, where the YHA guidebook promised that we would find a youth hostel. But for a wearisome hour, on the Avenue Franklin Roosevelt, nobody stopped for us. When we finally did get a ride, it was only for a few kilometers.

It went that way all morning, and the afternoon was worse. Family cars were all we got, often enough with the entire family inside, so we had to jam ourselves in back with the children. At three o'clock we still hadn't reached Chambery, and it was clear we wouldn't cross over the Col du Mont Cenis before nightfall, let

alone reach that youth hostel in Turin.

Basia kept irritating me by suggesting that we walk for a bit, to change our luck. In vain I explained that the driver had to slow down at a crossroads, giving him a chance to see how harmless we were, and how deserving of his charity. If we walked, however, we'd be turning our backs to the Good Samaritan. He might have a poor view of the road ahead, so he'd be concentrating on the driving and not on the handsome young couple whom he might favor with a ride, the lass in her duffle coat and the lad in his tweed jacket.

Arguing with one's sweetheart is never a wise thing to do, and especially when it came to Miss Deszberg, who after all had studied logic for a term. Her premises might sometimes be missing, but her arguments were impressive.

I offered a compromise: let me choose the best place to face the oncoming traffic. For her part, Basia could decide when we'd stood in one place too long and ought therefore to move along. That worked for half an hour. Then we were stopping and starting at ever-shorter intervals, so that we might as well have set out to *walk* to Turin.

Did we really let such a squabble spoil our afternoon? I'm afraid so. I have a photograph of Basia taken that day, perched on her rucksack by the side of the road during one of those interminable waits. We are in a town, probably La Tour-du-Pin, halfway between Lyon and Chambery. She is wearing the duffle coat, and she is as beautiful as my memory assures me she was, her nose as elegant, her lips as full. However, she is looking sideways at me with her brows slightly arched, the perfect image of skepticism. Clearly we've had a falling out.*

This quarrel, our bad luck on the road, and (above all, I suspect) last night's rebuke outside the Lyon youth hostel – taken together, they decided me to give up my quest. What was the point of a sweetheart one couldn't kiss, and who refused to defer to my superior knowledge of hitchhiking?

"This isn't going to work," I said.

"I suppose not," Basia said.

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* See the cover.

This wasn't the answer I'd expected – she was supposed to protest! So naturally I raised the stakes: "When we get to Turin," I said in a reasonable voice, one good friend to another, "I'll put you on a train to Florence, and I'll go to straight to Venice." It's true that my heart was set on roaming the alleys and squares of Venice, but I'd have let St. Mark's Basilica sink beneath the Adriatic, in exchange for a kiss from Basia's soft lips.

"You promised Mama," she pointed out. "You said you'd see me safe to Perugia."

I squirmed at this reminder. Dear Mama, with her trusting face, probably not understanding a word of my little speech!

"You'll be perfectly all right on the train," I said. "If you leave in the morning from Turin, you'll reach Perugia the same day. That's a lot faster than hitchhiking, at the rate we're going. Safer, too."

"All right," Basia said. "I will take the train, and you will go to Venice." Then the student of logic emerged: "But first we must reach Turin."

Perhaps it was after this exchange that the photograph was taken.

THE DAY GREW CHILL and dark as we tacked our slow path toward Chambery, gaining altitude in the process. No more warm breezes from the Mediterranean! On the high ground we could see the impossibly big-shouldered Alpine ridge that stood between us and our destination. I had never seen anything so huge or so white, and for the first time it occurred to me that it would be a considerable feat to hitchhike across it. I didn't share this thought with Basia. The day was discouraging enough already.

And our rides became fewer and farther between. Obviously we weren't going to cross into Italy today, nor even reach Modane at the foot of the mountains. Indeed, by six o'clock it was clear that we weren't even going to reach Chambery. Evening overtook us on the outskirts of Les Abrets, seventy-four kilometers from that youth hostel in Lyon. (It's not quite true that we could have walked that distance between breakfast and

dinner, but at six kilometers an hour we could have come close.) Route 6 was shrouded in dusk, though the sun still sparkled on the Alpine snowfields beyond.

We walked the last kilometer. A woman in a shawl, coming toward us with a basket hooked over her arm, confirmed what we had already guessed: there was no hostel in Les Abrets. She recommended an *auberge* that, she said, lay just a hundred meters farther along the Rue de la Republique, as Route 6 was locally known.

"The length of a football field," I said to Basia.

"Then why can't we see it?"

"Perhaps football fields are longer in France."

Basia sighed. "It will be less expensive," she said, "if we share the same room."

"Yes." Oh my, what was this?

She was silent for ten or twelve paces. Then she said: "But you should have been the one to suggest it, not leave it to me."

"Yes," I said. I didn't think she would have agreed to the arrangement as readily as I had done, but I wasn't going to risk the moment by pointing this out.

The auberge proved to be a HOTEL, as announced on a neatly painted sign above the front door. It was a two-story building of gray stucco, with lace curtains in the windows and the street number on a square blue tile beside the door. We went inside, careful not to swing our rucksacks into anything breakable, and were confronted by Madame at a concierge window, with her private parlor visible beyond it. Basia and she fell into deep conversation, and I saw that what seemed a window was actually the upper half of a Dutch door, with a shelf on the lower half to serve as a desk. As for Madame, she reminded me irresistibly of one of our rucksacks, skinny at the top but spreading out generously below.

"A thousand francs," Basia told me, a sum that would have paid for five nights at a youth hostel.

"See if she'll take six hundred," I said, delighted to bargain since I didn't have to do it myself. "Say we're poor students, say that –"

Basia smiled for the first time in hours. She was ten years old again, haggling in the bazaar on Aunt Krysia's behalf. After several volleys, she announced the compromise: "Eight hundred francs."

"Well done," I said. Then, to show that I too had a part in this negotiation, I looked Madame in the eye and said: "*Avec petit dejeneur*."

"*Comment?*" she said. Basia repeated it – in the same words and with the very same inflection, or so it seemed to me – and Madame beamed at her. "*Mais certainment!*" Yes, breakfast was included. Then: "*Passports!*"

This was my first encounter with the Continental custom of commandeering the passport of an overnight guest, but Basia assured me that it was perfectly in order. *La police* would come by in the evening to ensure that no desperate criminals were spending the night in their district. Besides, the passports were security that we wouldn't skip out without paying. "Wouldn't it be easier if we paid in advance?" I asked.

"That's not how it's done."

With great reluctance, I handed my precious green passport through the little window to Madame. She opened it to the photo page and a smooth-chinned lad with spectacles and narrow jaw. As deliberately as the immigration officer at the Calais ferry hall, she turned to the amendments page and nodded her head at the same lad in a photo taken after Christmas. "*Avec et sans barbe!*" she said approvingly.

Then she took Basia's book and thumbed through it. Strictly speaking, this was not a passport but a travel document, of the sort issued by European governments to resident aliens without passports of their own – displaced persons, they were called. It had a gray cover, some black diagonals, and the words *Titre de Voyage / Travel Document*. Though more substantial than mine, it nevertheless had a thrifty air, as if it might be revoked with the next change of government.

It satisfied Madame, in any event. She tucked the documents into a cubbyhole at her right hand, at the same time retrieving a key with a heavy brass disk. Then she swung open the half-door

and led us up the stairs, wheezing as she went. She showed us into room number five, containing two narrow beds with a small nightstand between, an oak dresser, a washbasin with the customary warning – *eau non potable* – and a window overlooking the Route d'Italie. My heart fluttered nicely. I was in a hotel room with the love of my life! To be sure, I'd have preferred a double bed, but no doubt Basia had closed out that possibility.

Madame left us, wheezing and coughing down the carpeted stairs. I was hugely impressed by her sophistication. Once in a while I'd rented a hotel room or Kozy Kabin with my college girlfriend, a process that involved a great deal of sneaking about, separate arrivals, assumed names, make-believe wedding rings, and so on. And that was in the United States! In England, with a narrow-nosed landlady guarding the stairs, and reinforced by a phalanx of elderly permanent residents, I wouldn't have attempted it. But on the Continent, it seemed, our morals were our own affair. The only thing Madame wanted from us was our passports.

A hot bath would have cost another 100 francs, so we took turns at the washbasin and its somewhat spotted mirror. Basia went for a walk while I washed up, then I dressed again and went down to the front step to let her know the coast was clear. Madame watched me pass without comment, but when I returned, she'd shut the upper half of her Dutch door. Either she had seen it all before, or she had dismissed us as crazy foreigners. I saw no sign of the police, or of our passports.

Basia, like me, had no nightclothes, so she was dressed again in her black trousers and white blouse when I returned. Her hair was damp – she'd washed it! – and tousled from the towel, an effect that made me weak in the knees. She had folded back the nubbly spread on her bed, the one near the door. Since there were no chairs, we each sat on our own bed, knee to knee thanks to the close quarters. I pulled the cork on the wine bottle with my teeth and gave her the first drink, and she passed it back to me. It was a red wine, homely and smooth, decanted that afternoon from a vat behind the zinc counter of a *bar-tabac* in La Tour-du-Pin. I particularly liked drinking from the same glass lip that had

just been kissed by Basia.

What did we talk about? Her family, I suppose. I learned a great deal about Basia's history in the course of our travels. I knew that her father had been killed in the Katyn Forest massacre, though I don't recall that she mentioned her half-brother. I knew that Mama and the girls had been sent into exile and that in her sweet confusion Mama brought along a chamber pot as her only utensil. Basia told me this story, or anyhow I understood her to be telling it, as a little joke upon Mama, and I'm sure I laughed along with her. But if you are bound for Siberia in a boxcar with two little girls, forty or fifty strangers, and a hole in the floor for a toilet, could you bring any more serviceable bit of furniture than a chamber pot?

I knew about shopping with Aunt Krysia at the bazaar, and that Mama had worked in the officers' club in Tehran. I knew that in her travels Basia had acquired a working knowledge of Russian – she taught me to say *dosvedanya*, farewell – though somehow it never occurred to me to ask where she'd perfected her nearly flawless English. Since it was my native language, English was transparent. I took it for granted, as the natural order of things, the way a young person looks upon most aspects of the world around him.

But now that I open the tap – it was *dosvedanya* that did it! – more things come to mind. I knew that when she dreamed of home, about Mama and the aunts, she dreamed in Polish, but if about her classes at the University, the dream was in English. That when she sent a telegram to Ealing – Manchester students didn't use the telephone – she addressed it to "Mama" followed by a few words in Polish instead of the family name, so as to keep the word count down. And she told me how she went with friends to the Hallé concerts at the Free Trade Hall, a glorious ark on Peter Street uptown, where she and some friends would eat fish and chips while they waited for the rush seats to open; then they sprinted into the auditorium, sitting on the floor if they couldn't find seats.

As for my half of the conversation, Basia thinks that I talked about books and my ambition to write them. Yes, no doubt I

lectured her about my literary heroes, and perhaps something about Stephen Faust.

Anyhow we chatted, sitting on our separate beds, trouser knee to trouser knee, and passing the wine bottle back and forth. The disagreement of the afternoon was long behind us, and I suppose this new state of affairs – that I had accepted the fact that we were friends, but nothing more than friends – was a relief to me as well. And no doubt the wine helped put everything into a more comfortable perspective.

But after a bit, a strange and magical thing happened. Basia slid off the bedspread and sat on the floor, her back against the bed frame, and gave me the most bewitching smile I have ever seen on another person's face. It was as if she'd hooked me with a gaff and pulled me down to sit with her, my legs under her bed and my back against my own. My arms were around her waist. This was much more comfortable than an embrace among the trees behind the youth hostel in Lyon.

And that is how I came to feast upon the soft and perfect cupid's bow of Basia's lips.

I wasn't in the least bit tipsy, but neither was I thinking clearly. I once saw a cartoon – in *The New Yorker*, I think – purporting to show a cross-section of the brain of a middle-aged American male. Fully half of it was given over to the lyrics of a pop song:

Volare, oh oh,
E contare, oh oh oh oh.
How my glad heart sings;
Your love gives me wings.
This dream won't come again!

In the spring of 1955, my brain was similarly stuffed, with Basia's soft lips, firm breasts, and neat pupka substituting for the lyrics of *Volare*. All the rest – the Year of Revolution, the Young Italy movement, the masterpieces of James Joyce and Johann Wolfgang von Goethe – had to contend for the small remainder of my intelligence.

Ah, how we rolled about on the floor of that little hotel in Les Abrets! Eventually, though, we got off the floor and onto Basia's

bed, a bit disheveled but fully clothed. And in time I kissed her goodnight and returned to my own bed.

DOES THIS SEEM impossibly innocent? It was 1955 – a different time. In the movies, Doris Day and Rock Hudson went to separate beds in ironed pajamas, and the beds were farther apart than ours in Les Abrets. Unmarried lovers did not go to bed at all. At most their coupling might be suggested by a fireworks display, as Alfred Hitchcock provided for Grace Kelly and Cary Grant in *To Catch a Thief*.

And Basia had been schooled almost entirely by the nuns, from childhood until she enrolled at Manchester, where Uncle Jan met her at the bus stop if she were expected home after the evening rush hour. She had experienced none of the furtive gropings that were a part of growing up in America:

I was eighteen years old when I started at Manchester, but my only experience of men was an altar boy at Kidderminster, when I was at school. He used to look at me when going from the side bench to the altar during Sunday Mass. But I am not sure even of that conquest. My friend sitting next to me told me he made eyes at her.

Anyway, at Manchester my studies were my main concern. I did have a few not especially memorable dates during holidays, which I spent with my family in London. I went to dances with Lalka at the Polish Hearth Club. That was plenty enough.

There was Paul, the Irish medical student who took her to dinner with his family at the Ritz, but evidently he never pressed his luck as far as I had done. Indeed, I probably was the first to kiss Basia on the lips, or anyhow the first she kissed in return.

However that may be, I was wonderfully content, and next morning I felt as pleased with myself as any bridegroom. We were alone in the breakfast room – it was Easter Monday. Not many people were traveling, and those few were sleeping in. Madame led us to a corner table with hoop-backed chairs, somewhat creaky when we settled into them, and a tablecloth held in place by metal clips. There were cloth napkins, too, along with white cups and saucers, metal spoons, and a triangular

Cinzano ashtray in white, red, and blue. Madame went off to the kitchen, wheezing and sighing, and returned with a tray containing two metal pitchers, one containing very strong coffee and the other a pint of hot, frothy milk, along with a basket of croissants. Oh my goodness, the buttery taste of those croissants, flaking into my mouth, there to be washed down with *cafe au lait*, and finally the Gaulois that we passed back and forth across the table, fat and pungent. Was there ever a more satisfying meal?

Luckily I wasn't Doktor Faust and hadn't wagered with Mephisto, all experience to be mine, but my soul to the devil if I asked for the moment to linger:

> If I should say to the fleeting hour,
> "Stop a while, you are so fair!"
> Then bind me with your iron chain;
> I'll go down with you to Hell!

I'd surely have lost the bet that morning. If ever I wanted to stop the clock of my life, it was then and there, with the fresh croissants and the sweet cafe au lait, sharing a Gaulois with Basia Deszberg.

"Today," I said, with all the thoughtfulness I could muster, "we'll reach Turin. Florence on Tuesday, Perugia the day after." Basia raised her left eyebrow, a perfect arch. "Or Perugia on Thursday," I added, thinking of yesterday's slog, and anyhow not eager for the adventure to end.

No more was said on the subject.