

Amanda Hodgkinson

22 Britannia Road

Publisher: Fig Tree



Amanda Hodgkinson was born in Somerset and grew up in a small seaside village in Essex.

She moved to France with her husband and their two daughters seven years ago, after falling in love with a ruined house on a hill with a view of the snow-capped Pyrenees. She had just finished an MA in creative writing at UEA and wanted more than anything to write a novel.

While renovating the house, growing their own vegetables and keeping chickens, she simultaneously developed other strands to her career, playing in a French band (singing and playing guitar, performing all over the region) waitressing and arranging flowers for weddings while also working as a columnist for France magazine and writing for various UK magazines about life in France. But finally she found time to write her novel.

She began thinking about this novel when she met a Polish WW2 ex-airman on a farm in Suffolk. His story was nothing like her characters' story but what struck her was the loneliness of this man. He was 22 years old when the war began and 28 years old when it ended. He had stayed in the UK and had never married (he said he had been too young for marriage at the beginning of the war and too old by the end of it).

At the same time, she heard a Russian woman being interviewed on the radio saying that during the WW2, when she was hiding in a forest, she ate birch tree bark because there was nothing else to eat. The novel came from these two stories.

22 Britannia Road is Amanda Hodgkinson's first novel.

22 Britannia Road

Spring 1946. To England.

The boy was everything to her. Small and unruly, he had a nervy way about him like a wild creature caught in the open. All the dark hearts of the lost, the found and the never forgotten lived in his child's body, in his quick eyes. She loved him with the same unforgiving force that pushes forests from the deep ground, but still she feared it was not enough to keep him. So she was taking him to England, determined Janusz would love him and keep him safe.

On the ship's sailing list she was named as Silvana Nowak. Twenty-seven years old. Married. Mother of a son, Aurek Josef, aged seven years.

'What is your profession?' the British soldier asked her, checking the identity papers she put before him.

She looked at the documents on his desk and saw pages of women's names. All were listed as housewives or housekeepers.

Behind her, hundreds more women, dressed as she was in donated clothes, stood silently with their children. Above the soldier's head, a sign in several languages, including Polish, detailed the ship's rules.

All blankets and sheets remain the property of the ship. All stolen items will be confiscated.

Silvana tightened her grasp on her son. The soldier glanced at her quickly and then looked back to his papers. She knew why. It embarrassed him to see a woman so unkempt and a child with such restless ways. She touched her headscarf, checking it was in place, and pressed her other hand into Aurek's back, trying to make him stand up straight.

'Profession?'

'Survivor,' she whispered, the first word that came to her.

The soldier didn't look up. He lifted his pen. 'Housekeeper or housewife?'

'I don't know,' she said, and then, aware of the queue shifting impatiently behind her, 'Housewife.'

So that was it. She was recorded, written neatly into a book in indelible black ink. She was given a transport number, a label pinned on her lapel that corresponded with the details on the ship's passenger list. Proof that she and the boy were mother and son. That was a good start. Nobody, after all, could disagree with or dispute an official document. Only the title *housewife* looked questionable. Together or separate, Silvana was sure nobody would believe the words *house* or *wife* had anything to do with her.

All night, while the sea carried the ship and its passengers towards another land, Silvana worked at remembering. She found herself a space in one of the crowded corridors below deck and sat, arms crossed, legs tucked under her. Curled into herself in this way, with Aurek hidden under her coat,

she breathed through the odour of sweat and diesel fumes, the throb of the engines marking time, while she tried to recall her life with Janusz. Always, though, the same memories came to her. The ones she didn't want to own. A road she didn't want to travel. A filthy sky full of rain, and planes coming out of the clouds. She shook her head, tried to think of other things, to cut off the image that would surely come. And then there it was. The wet mud shining underfoot. Trees twisting in the wind and the child swaddled in a jumble of blankets, lying in a wooden handcart.

Silvana pulled Aurek tighter to her, rocking him back and forth, the memories departing. He snaked a bony hand out from under her coat and she felt his small fingers searching her face. And how was it that love and loss were so close together? Because no matter how she loved the boy – and she did, furiously, as if her own life depended on him – loss was always there, following at her heels.

By the time the dawn sky leaked light into the darkness, Silvana was too tired to think any more and finally closed her eyes, letting the heartbeat drone of the engines settle her to a thankfully dreamless slumber.

Morning brought with it a pale sun and salt-laden winds. Silvana pushed her way through the crowds to the upper decks, Aurek hanging on her coat-tail. Gripping the handrail, she let him settle in a crouch between her feet, the weight of him against her legs. Green waves lay far below and she stared down at them, trying to imagine what England would be like, a place she knew nothing of except that this was where her husband Janusz now lived.

She had been lost and he had found her. He must have thought he was reaching back into the past; that she would be as she was when he left her, his young wife, red hair pinned up in curls, a smile on her face and their darling son in her arms. He couldn't know that the past was dead and she was the ghost of the wife he once had.

The heaving of the ship made her dizzy and she leaned against the handrail. She had left her country far behind and now there was no shoreline, no land to mourn, only water as far as the horizon and shards of dazzling light splintering the waves. She hadn't seen Janusz since the day he left Warsaw six long years ago. Would she even recognize him now? She could recall the day they met, the date they married, his shoe size; that he was right-handed. But where did this awkward grabbing of dates and facts get her?

She squinted at the sea, the waves churning, over and over. She had loved him once. That much she was sure of. But so much lost time stretched between them. Six years might as well be a hundred. Could she really lay claim to a man simply because she remembered his collar size?

Aurek pulled at her hand and Silvana dropped to her knees, wiping her mouth with the back of her sleeve, trying to smile. The boy was the reason she was making this journey. A boy must have a father. Soon the past would be behind them and England would become their present. There she was

sure they would be able to live each day with no yesterdays and no memories to threaten or histories to follow them. She ran her fingers through Aurek's cropped hair, and he wrapped his arms around her neck. She was on her way to a new life, and her one piece of Poland was still with her.

22 Britannia Road, Ipswich

Janusz thinks the house looks lucky. He steps back to get a better look at Number 22 Britannia Road, and admires the narrow red-brick property with its three windows and blue door. The door has a pane of coloured glass set in it: a yellow sunrise sitting in a green border with a bluebird in its centre. It's so typically English it makes him smile. It's just what he has been searching for.

It is the last house in a terrace, and although it stands next to a bomb site, somehow it has escaped any real damage itself. The only sign is a crack in the coloured glass pane, a line running through the bluebird that makes it look as if it might have problems if it tried to fly. Apart from that, it is possible to believe the war has never touched this building. It's a fanciful idea, he knows, but one he likes. Maybe the house will share some of its luck with him and his wife and son.

'Don't you worry about that eyesore,' says the estate agent beside him, waving his hand at the wasteland where dirty-faced children are playing. 'That'll be cleared in no time. We'll have this town back on her feet quick enough.' He straightens the cuffs of his tweed jacket and hands Janusz a bunch of keys. 'There you are. All yours. I hope you like living here. Can I ask you where you're from?'

Janusz has been waiting for this question. The first thing people want to know is where you come from.

'Poland,' he says. 'I'm Polish.'

The estate agent pulls out a cigarette case from the inside pocket of his jacket. 'You speak damned good English. In the army, were you?'

And that is the second thing they ask: *What are you doing here?* But Janusz is at ease in this country. He knows the manners and ways of things. Keep everything simple and to the point. Let them know you are on their side, and they're happy.

The first time someone had asked him where he came from, back when he had been anxious about his foreignness, seeing it like a birthmark, a facial port-wine stain visible to all, he had mistakenly tried to answer them. He'd not been in England very long – a year, if that – and the loud, bloody enthusiasm for war he found among his new comrades had lit a kind of fire in his heart. A rich blazing ran through his veins and flared in him an outgoing recklessness he'd never experienced before. He was in a smoky hall with a

noisy crowd of RAF men, drinking beer the colour of engine oil, and launched into his own story, the whole journey from Poland at the very start of the war, to France and then England.

Too late, he realized he'd made it too complicated and in any case nobody was listening. Nobody wanted to know about the women he'd left behind. He carried on, stumbling over vocabulary, finishing up lost in his own regrets, mumbling into his beer in Polish, talking of painful things like love and honour. When he left the hall and stood in the sobering night air, looking up at a sky littered with stars, he regretted every foolish word he had uttered.

He squares his shoulders and closes his mind to those memories.

'I served with the Royal Air Force,' he says, his voice clear and steady.

'The Polish Corps. I came over in 1940. I've been here ever since.'

'Ah. Right you are.' The man smiles and offers him a cigarette.

'I was in the army, myself. I met quite a few of your lads. Great drinkers, the Poles.'

He lights his cigarette, flicks the match onto the ground and hands the box to Janusz.

'Stationed around here, were you?'

'No,' says Janusz, taking the matchbox, giving a brief nod of thanks. 'We moved about a lot. I was demobbed in Devon and offered work here or up in the North.'

'Well, you'll find this is a decent enough area. Ipswich is a nice little market town. And you got this house just in time. I've a list as long as my arm of people wanting this property. If you hadn't been there, banging on my door before I'd even opened up, it would've been some other fellow who'd have got it. It's a nice family house. Have you, er . . . any . . .?'

'Family? I have a wife and a son. They are coming to Britain next month.'

'Reunited, heh? That's good to hear.'

Janusz takes a drag on his cigarette, blows a smoke ring and watches it drift out of shape.

'I hope so. It's been six years since I last saw them.'

The estate agent cocks his head on one side, a concerned look on his face.

'That's tough. Mind you, look at it this way, you've got this house, a job and your family's coming over here. Add it up and you've got yourself a happy ending.'

Janusz laughs. That's exactly what he is hoping for.

'That's right,' he says. 'A happy ending.'

When the Red Cross officer told him Silvana and Aurek had been found in a British refugee camp, he had not been able to smile.

'They are in a bad state,' the officer said. The man's voice had dropped almost to a whisper. 'They'd been living in a forest. I gather they'd been there for a long time. Good luck. I hope it works out for you all.'

Janusz jangles his new house keys on his finger, watching the tweed-jacketed back of the estate agent as he walks briskly down the hill. So this is it. Peacetime. And he's got a house. A home for Silvana and Aurek when they arrive. His father would have been proud of him, bringing his family back together. Doing the right thing. Looking to the future. He can't return to Poland. Not now that his country has communist rule imposed upon it. He must face facts. Dreams of a free and independent Poland are just that – dreams. His home is here. Churchill himself said Polish troops should have the citizenship and freedom of the British Empire, and that's what he's accepted. Britain is his home now.

If he ever speaks to his parents or his sisters again, if one day they answer his letters and find him here, he hopes they will understand that this is where he has chosen to be.

He pockets his keys and wonders what life here will bring him. When he was offered two jobs, one in a factory making bicycles in Nottingham and one in an engineering works in a town in East Anglia, he sat in a library with a map of Britain and put his thumb on Ipswich. It was a small town with a harbour squatting on a straggling line of blue estuary leading to the sea. With his little finger he could reach across the blue and touch France. That's what decided it for him. He would live in Ipswich because he could be nearer to Héléne. It was a stupid reason, especially when he was trying so hard to forget, but it eased the pain a little.

He yawns and sighs deeply. It feels good here. The air is clean enough and it's a quiet place. Terraced brick houses stretch away down the hill. In the distance, a church spire reaches for the sky, the top of it boxed in by scaffolding. Whether the scaffolding is there so that long-awaited repair work can be carried out or because of recent war damage, he doesn't know. And he doesn't care. He has stopped believing in God. Now he hopes for specific things. A job to go to. A family to care for and perhaps, one day, a small degree of happiness.

Beyond the church, rows of housing are hemmed by the river and the tall chimneys of the factories. Beyond them are fields and woodland. Above him, the sky is chewing-gum grey but some blue is breaking through. Héléne would have said there was just enough blue to make a pair of trousers for a gendarme.

He lights another cigarette and allows himself to think of France. It's a weakness that he savours briefly, sweet and good as an extra spoonful of sugar in bitter barracks tea. He thinks of the farmhouse with its red tiled roof and blue wooden shutters. Héléne standing at the kitchen door. Her tanned skin and her warm southern accent, the life in her beautiful eyes.

He finishes his cigarette and wanders through the house again, planning, making lists of things that need mending or replacing. Flinging open the back door, he strides out into the garden. It is a long rectangular piece of land. The grass hasn't seen a mower in years and there

are nettles and brambles everywhere. At the end of the garden is an old oak tree. It looks just right for a tree-house for his son. And when the lawn is cut and the weeds are dug up, he'll have flower beds and a vegetable plot too. A real English garden for his family.

With his list of things to do in his hand, Janusz stands at the front door and watches the children playing on the wasteland beside the house. Hard to imagine his son Aurek will be one of them soon. Janusz is going to be a good father to the boy. He's determined to get things right. In the grainy sunlight, the children laugh and leap, shrieking through the afternoon, their shouts mingling with the sharp-edged call of gulls from the quay. When Janusz hears the cries of women calling them home for tea, he locks up and walks back to spend his last night in lodgings.

At the town hall, he fills in forms and waits in queues for government vouchers for furniture and paint. The furniture comes from a warehouse near the bus station and is all the same: solid, square shapes in thin, dark-stained wood. He buys wallpaper from Woolworths: 'Summer Days' – cream-coloured with sprays of tiny red roses in diagonal lines. He gets enough for the front parlour and the main bedroom. He buys wallpaper for Aurek's room too, asking the advice of a shop assistant, who says she has a son the same age.

He papers the hall and the kitchen in a pale beige, patterned with curling bamboo leaves and twiggly canes in soft green. Upstairs, rose-pink paint for the bathroom and landing. Aurek's room has grey formations of aeroplanes flying across its walls. It's a good-sized room. He'll be able to share it with a brother one day if everything works out the way Janusz wants it to.

Every evening Janusz comes back from work and starts on the house, finishing only when he is too exhausted to carry on. When he lies down to sleep he has the impression his arms are outstretched in front of him, still painting and wallpapering.

Alone on his bed at night, he dreams. He enters his parents' home, running up the porch steps. The heavy front door swings open and he calls for his mother but he knows he has arrived too late and everybody has gone. In one of the empty, high-ceilinged rooms is a dark-haired woman in a yellow dress. She stands up, takes off her dress and beckons to him, then maddeningly, quick as a fish in midstream, the dream changes direction and she is gone. He wakes with a start, eyes open, heart thumping. He moves his hand towards the ache in his groin and twists his face into the pillow. This loneliness will kill him, he's sure of it.

Victoria station is huge, and even at seven in the morning the place is noisy and full of lost people who grab Janusz by the elbow and ask him questions he can't answer. He wipes the sweat from his forehead with a handkerchief and checks his watch. He has been practising what to say to her when he sees her. 'It's been a long time' is what he thinks he will say. It sounds casual and

yet full of meaning.

He finds himself searching his mind for Polish phrases, but he's been immersed in the English language for so long now he has lost the habit. It's like trying to recall the names of half-forgotten school friends, requiring too much effort and an unwilling excavation of the past. Truth is, there's too much nostalgia in his mother tongue. If Silvana can speak English it will be easier. They will be making a new life here and she will have to learn the language. 'Welcome to Britain' is another phrase he thinks he might use.

The platforms overflow with crowds. Suitcases are piled high on trolleys, and rag-and-bone bales of clothes and belongings are everywhere. People blur past in greys and browns and dark blues. He scans the crowd, trying not to think of H el ene, how he had once imagined it would be her he would meet like this after the war. Then he sees a woman looking his way. He stares at her and feels a jolt of recognition. Everything comes back to him. It is Silvana. His wife. His hand goes up to take off his hat, an awful, narrow-brimmed trilby. It came with his demob suit and he swears it's made of cardboard. He smooths his hair, spreads finger and thumb across his moustache, coughs, clasps the hat in his hands and walks towards her. She is wearing a red headscarf and, now he has seen her, she stands out in the colourless crowds like a single poppy in a swaying cornfield.

Janusz focuses on the headscarf until he is near enough to see the embroidered birds with flowing wings sweeping over her forehead and tucking themselves under her chin. She looks thinner, older, her cheekbones more prominent than he remembers. As she recognizes him she gives a small cry.

A skinny, dark-haired child leaps into her arms. Is that Aurek? Is that him? The last time Janusz saw him he was just a baby, a plump toddler with baby curls. Not even old enough for his first haircut. He tries to see the boy's face, to find some familiarity in his features, but the child clambers up Silvana like a monkey, pulling her headscarf off, his arms locking around her neck, burying his head in her chest.

Janusz stops still in front of them and for a moment his courage fails him. What if he has made a foolish mistake and these two are somebody else's family? If all he has really recognized is the forlorn look the woman carries in her eyes and his own lonely desires?

'Silvana?'

She is fighting the child, trying to pull her headscarf back on. 'Janusz? I saw you in the crowd. I saw you looking for us . . .'

'Your hair?' he says, all thought of rehearsed lines gone from his mind.

Silvana touches her head and the scarf falls around her shoulders. She looks away from him.

'I'm sorry.' He doesn't know whether it is the sight of her that fills him with apologies or the idea that he has already made her uncomfortable in his presence. 'Really. I didn't mean . . . How are you?'

Silvana pulls her scarf back onto her head and knots it under her chin. 'The soldiers cut it.'

It's hard to hear her clearly with the racket and grind of trains arriving and departing and guards calling across the platforms. He takes a tentative step closer.

'We were living in the woods,' she says. 'Did they tell you? The soldiers found us and told us the war was over. They cut our hair off when they found us. They do it to stop the lice. It's growing back slowly.'

'Oh. It doesn't matter. I . . . I understand,' says Janusz, although he doesn't. The child clutches something wooden in his hand. It looks vaguely familiar. Janusz frowns.

'Is that the rattle your father made?'

Silvana opens her mouth to speak and then closes it again. He notices her cheeks colour slightly in a blush that disappears as quickly as it comes. But of course it is the rattle. She doesn't need to say a word. The dark wood, the handmade look to it: it has to be. He smiles with relief, suddenly reassured. Of course this is his family.

'You kept it all this time? Can I see it?'

He reaches out, but the boy pulls it to his chest and makes a grumbling sound.

'He's tired,' says Silvana. 'The journey has tired him.'

It's a shock to see a child so thin. His son's face has a transparency to it, and the way his skin is tight, revealing the cradling structure of bones beneath – it makes Janusz's heart ache like a soft bruise.

'Aurek? Small, isn't he? Hello, little fellow. Don't be frightened. I am your . . . I am your father.'

'Your moustache,' says Silvana, pulling the boy onto her other hip. 'It's different. It makes you look different.'

'My moustache? I've had it for years. I'd forgotten.'

'Six years,' she says.

He nods his head. 'And my family? Do you have news of them? Eve? Do you know where she is?'

Silvana's eyes darken. Her pupils widen and shine, and he's sure she is going to tell him Eve is dead. That they have all died. He holds his breath.

'I don't know,' she says. 'I'm sorry. I don't know where any of them are.'

'You don't know?'

'I never saw them again after you left us.'

He's been waiting for news of his family for years. He'd thought Silvana might arrive with letters from them, stories about them. Some information on their whereabouts. They stand in silence until Janusz speaks again.

'Well, you're here now.'

Silvana answers in a whisper and he has to lean in towards her to

hear what she is saying.

'I can hardly believe it. I can hardly believe we're here.'

Janusz laughs to stop himself from crying. He presses her hand into his, curling his fingers over hers. He feels tired suddenly. It is as much as he can do to look her in the eye.

'I expect we've both changed . . . but it doesn't matter,' he says, trying to sound relaxed. 'We're still the same people inside. Time doesn't change that.'

Even as he says it, he knows he is lying. She does too. He can see it in her eyes. The war has changed all of them. And Silvana's hair is not just short. It has turned grey.

Poland, 1937

Silvana

The very first time Silvana saw Janusz he was swimming. It was late spring in 1937 and all about was a feeling of listlessness, as if the sudden appearance of the sun had turned the town into a child that wanted only to play in the streets all day. Silvana had finished her afternoon shift at the Kine cinema where she worked as an usherette. The daylight was always surprising to her after the dark interior of the cinema, and she stood on the pavement feeling the breeze playing with her skirt hem, the sunlight stroking her cheek. She was eighteen years old and all she knew was that she didn't want to go home just yet. That to walk in the sun, though she had nowhere to go, was preferable to the damp silences that would creep over her the moment she entered her parents' small cottage.

She wandered down the tree-lined main street, past the square with its water fountain and tall, crumbling houses, and took a dusty path into the shadows of the red-brick church and the presbytery. Once past those solid buildings she left the shade behind, the sunlight leading her down the road out of town. A few hundred yards ahead was her parents' one-storey wooden house, painted the same blue as the other peasant cottages that surrounded the town. Silvana stopped and stepped off the road into an apple orchard. It had once belonged to her family but her father had sold it. He worked on other people's farms now, gathering wood, harvesting, whatever the season asked of him. The trees were loaded with white petals, big clouds of blossom, the grass under the trees soft and wildly green. A scene of ripenings and hopes. She stood in the dappled light and breathed in deeply, knowing that whatever happened to her in life, wherever she went – and she hoped it would be far away from this small town – she would always love this place.

Silvana took a footpath towards the river, glancing back at the cottage. Her mother Olga would be in the kitchen, drinking the vodka she distilled in the cow barn, the clear fiery liquid made from sugar beet or horseradish or, in a poor year, onions and elder. Yes, she thought. Her mother

would be drunk, surrounded by all the hapless creatures she collected: kittens climbing her skirts; puppies tumbling at her feet and chewing on the table legs; the nests of blind rabbit kittens, wingless chicks and solitary leverets that she fed every hour and nursed as she had once nursed her own dying sons.

She was known among her neighbours as a good woman who had not had things easy, having a difficult daughter to bring up. Silvana knew there was some truth in that: she had been a hard child, was still tough and inflexible, but no harder, she always believed, than her own mother had been to her. And then there were her brothers. The three boys born before her who had failed to grow up. Her mother's little princes caught in their infancy, who had blinked and whimpered through her childhood. Silvana knew their stories off by heart.

Her father Josef had started whittling a wooden rattle when his wife first fell pregnant. He'd used a piece of cherry wood from the orchard, and somehow that wood had brought bad luck down on them. He was not a talented carver in any case. By the time the child was born, the rattle was only half finished. When the child died at three months, around the same time the potato crop failed, Josef carried on carving the rattle. He didn't notice the knife sinking into his thumb, making a gaping wound that bled and bled. When Silvana was young she liked to hold his thumb, run her finger along the jagged seam of his scar and hear the story of how he got it.

It was after the death of their second son that Olga began drinking the vodka she made to sell to other peasants. Josef still hadn't finished the rattle. He had sold the fields by then and only worked in his orchards.

'It can't happen three times,' he said to Olga. 'We'll try again.'

After the third child died, Olga knew the rattle must be cursed. She buried it in the garden, wrapped in a lock of her hair to ward off evil. Josef dug it up one moonless night and hid it in the unused cot. He went to his wife and told her they would try again for a child.

Cold as an unlit oven, Olga barely looked at the daughter she gave birth to a year later. Silvana Olga Valeria Dabrowski. Josef believed the curse had been broken. He finished the rattle, polished it, tied a ribbon to its handle and gave it to his healthy, strong-minded daughter.

But Olga couldn't forget her baby boys. She kept their clothes in a locked cupboard, wrapped in tissue. Blue nightdresses with sheep embroidered upon them, white knitted booties, small blue bobble hats, three shawls crocheted gossamer thin. When Silvana was old enough, she was allowed to touch the hems and rub the tiny collars between her fingers.

'Be careful,' Olga warned. 'These are more precious to me than gold.'

When she was ten years old, Silvana stole the baby clothes. She couldn't help herself. She took them out into the garden to play with, but it began to rain so she ran in. Olga found the clothes the next day, covered in mud, tangled and torn in the raspberry canes.

'I was wrong about you,' she said, locking Silvana's bedroom door. 'You are a deceitful little girl. Say sorry for what you have done.'

Silvana banged on her door, screaming to be let out. She would not apologize.

Olga put her mouth to the keyhole. 'A boy would never behave like this.'

'Your boys are dead!' screamed Silvana, full of her own furies. 'I'm your child. You hear me? I'm your child!'

'You're the devil's child!' her mother screamed back. 'You lived when my boys didn't.'

Over the years, Silvana hardened herself against all of them: her crazy mother, her useless father and the pressing ghosts of her dead brothers; all of them trapped within the four walls of the cottage.

In the afternoon sunlight, she flicked a wasp away from her face and stared at her home. For a place so full of complications, it appeared serene, and she wondered if all houses were capable of presenting such a good façade, looking four-square and right while their insides were full of banging doors and raised voices. She watched smoke rising from the chimney of the cottage for a moment longer, then turned her back on it and walked briskly towards the river and the big sawmill.

Weeping willows and green sallows overhung the sparkling waters of the river, the hum of insects as loud as the continual buzz of machinery in the mill. A path had been scythed along the bank and she kicked off her shoes and followed it, the grass springy under her stockinged feet. Ahead, she saw a group of young men, all of them laughing and jumping off the bank into the river. Feeling shy, with her shoes dangling in her hand and her stockings flecked with grass, she thought about turning back. Then one of the men caught her eye. He was blond, broad and muscular. Not tall, but strong-looking.

She stopped to watch him dive into the water. He closed his eyes and straightened his body. He held his hands above his head, dipped at the knees slightly so that his calf muscles bulged, and sprang off his toes, his body cutting through the water's surface, leaving only ripples behind. As he came up out of the water, he looked at her, shook the water from his hair and smiled. The sun caught the water droplets beading on his fair skin and turned them into tiny diamonds. He clambered onto the bank, his body shining like something brand-new. Silvana smiled back, dazzled by him.

Janusz was the only son in a family of five daughters, and to Silvana he was as golden as the rest were mouse-coloured. Five sisters, all anonymously plain, and Janusz, the eldest, with Prussian blue eyes and white-blond hair. A vodka bottle in a bar full of dark beer. As the only brother, he was the last to carry on the family name. His father drummed that into him, hoping his son would study law at university and become someone of importance in Polish society. His mother wanted him to study to be a priest.

Silvana saw what a good son Janusz was, how hard he tried to please his family. But she also knew he had no interest in studying law. Janusz loved

machinery, anything that had bits of metal and cogs and screws that he could take apart and put back together again. Really, he was the cleverest man she had ever met.

He lived in a three-storey house overlooking the municipal park. His father worked in local government, and the family prided themselves on their fine manners. So fine were their manners, they almost managed not to show their disappointment when, just months after Silvana and Janusz's first meeting, Janusz took her home and explained that he was going to do his duty and marry his sweetheart.

Janusz believed in God in those days. He never missed church, and he lectured Silvana at every opportunity on God's purpose for them all. Silvana liked to listen, though she didn't take it in much. She was too busy dreaming about American movie stars. At mass on Sundays she sat with his dull-eyed sisters, who complained of the aching necks they got from peering up at windows set high in stone walls, their brown felt hats tilted longingly towards the outside. His sister Eve said Janusz only loved God because he didn't have to talk to him face to face.

'You must never think Janusz is shy,' she told Silvana. 'He has plenty to say. It's just that growing up with sisters, and Mother being the way she is, poor Jan has been henpecked. His only defence is silence.'

Eve was the middle sister, stuck between two older sisters intent only on marriage and two younger sisters who carried on like twins and went everywhere arm in arm. As a result, she said, nobody noticed her and she was free to do whatever she wanted. And what Eve wanted was music. Her violin was her passion, and she practised for hours at a time, emerging from her bedroom with her brown hair fallen around her shoulders; her face, freckled like Janusz's, creased with concentration. She was always closer to her brother than the others, and Silvana liked her the best of all of them.

That first summer, when talk of a possible war with Germany was something neither of them took any interest in, Silvana and Janusz had spent their spare time by the river or taking bike rides out of town into the country.

'I don't want to say goodbye,' Janusz told her as they lay on the grass under the shade of a cedar tree.

She laughed and took his hand in hers. His face looked so serious.

'Janusz, we've only just got here. We can spend all day together.'

'Yes, but then you'll leave me.'

'I won't leave you. I'll see you tomorrow.'

'Why do you have to go to work tonight? I see all those men there who look at you when you take their tickets. They only go to look at you.'

'Don't be stupid. I love films. I like my job.' She felt annoyed with him and wanted to be mean, so she said, 'Anyway, I like it when men look at me. If I'm beautiful, I can't help it, can I? Maybe you should be careful. I might get bored and go off with someone else.'

He snatched his hand from hers and slapped her across the face,

quickly, the way you might knock a crawling fly from somebody's cheek. Silvana turned away from him as if he had hurt her badly, but she knew it was the other way round. She had done the hurting. When she looked back at him he was red in the face and his eyes watered as though he was about to burst into tears. She was pleased. Pleased to have got a reaction. He loves me, she thought.

She pretended to be angry. She got up and walked away, and he jumped up and ran after her. When she stopped fighting in his arms he kissed her passionately, slipping a hand inside her dress. His fingers pressed against her, following the curve of her breast, the run of her ribs, as if he were looking for a way to reach inside; as if he wanted to find her heart and take it for himself.

'You've already got it,' she whispered to him.

He stopped kissing her and looked into her eyes. Then he grabbed her hand and led her into the woods.

Silvana knew they had crossed an invisible line together, that they couldn't go back to how they had been before the slap. They made their way deeper into the woods and it got darker the further they pushed through the bracken, the trees growing closer together.

'We could keep going,' Janusz said, holding back a bramble. 'We could make a camp and live out here. I could have you all to myself.'

Silvana laughed. 'So that's what you want, huh?' She was a little afraid but she tipped her chin at him and tried to look confident.

'My stockings are getting ruined,' she said. Then she felt mischievous and lifted the skirt of her dress. 'Look at this ladder.' She showed him the rip in her black cotton stocking. 'You'll have to buy me new ones.'

'Let me see.'

'No. No, it's nothing.' Silvana pushed his hand away. She pouted at him. 'I suppose you're going to hit me again?'

He shook his head slowly. 'Never. I will never hurt you. I will always worship you.'

Nobody had spoken to her like that before. He knelt in front of her and moved his hand up her skirt, the coldness of his fingers against her warm thigh making her gasp. He was breathing heavily by then, as if he'd been running. When he tried to put his hand inside her underwear, she pushed him away.

'Please,' she said. 'Wait a minute.'

'What's the matter?' He was standing now, his mouth against her ear. 'Have you done this before?'

She shook her head. 'Never. What about you?'

'No. But I want to. Do you?'

She took a deep breath and nodded. 'Yes,' she whispered. 'I do.'

He kissed her again and they fell to their knees in the bracken.

It was as though she was the world, the whole wide world, and she

let him explore her. And that was how she got her baby: the day Janusz led her into the woods. She would always remember feeling enormous that day, a giant woman, her hardness melted to softness, driven away by the sudden generosity of her body, the beginnings of their son already trawling in her juices.

'I love you,' Janusz said afterwards. 'I love you.'

They lay side by side, holding hands. Silvana closed her eyes and listened to her heart steadying. She was shrinking now, a breeze chilling her bare legs, doubts gathering in her mind over what they had done.

'Do you really?' she asked. 'Why?'

'What do you mean, why? I just love you.'

'I want to know why.'

She wanted him to say he loved her because she was beautiful and because she was the one he had been looking for all his life. (She watched a great many films in those days and was very susceptible to American musicals.)

'Because that's what happens,' he said, after a moment's pause.

'People fall in love.'

'Oh.'

'And do you love me?'

Silvana looked at his sweet, serious face, the longing in his eyes, his unbuttoned collar and his braces hanging loose. She stroked his cheek and he groaned, catching hold of her hand and kissing it.

'Yes,' she said. 'Yes, I think so.'

'Show me,' he breathed. 'Show me again.'

So she did.