

Excerpt from THIS IS HOW IT BEGINS, A Novel

Forthcoming on October 3, 2017 from She Writes Press

1

The Roslan

In her favorite gallery of the Baldwin Museum in Hampshire, Massachusetts, Ludka Zeilonka spun around to face her honors class, fast enough that one of the young men gasped. She staggered backward and flung out an arm, ostensibly to make a sweeping introduction to Alexander Roslan's most famous painting—*Prelude, 1939*—but in truth to brace a hand against the wall to avoid falling. Ludka was keenly aware of how she appeared to others, not because she was vain or insecure, but because she was long accustomed to the consequences of casting particular impressions. In this case—a dazzling and hip, if ancient and somewhat tough professor.

In a stage whisper too loud for the museum, she demanded that they tell her what they see. This was unfair. She wanted them to see what *wasn't* in the painting: legible signage, playful children, well-stocked grocers' bins, churches, and eye contact among the ordinary people going about their lives. On loan from the National Museum of Warsaw, the canvas was as long as a train car, as tall as an average-sized man, and the street scene painted on it covered two city blocks, one of which was dominated by a synagogue.

The Roslan depicted what could have been any European city, but Ludka knew it was Warsaw, not only because Roslan had still lived there in '39, but because Ludka had, too.

Without the title you could miss the point altogether, but that was part of Roslan's genius, part of what made him a master; the prelude was the true invasion, incremental and insidious, possible anywhere.

Ludka still felt a bit off, and in the guise of stepping back to get distance from the painting, she moved past the students and sat carefully on a tufted black leather bench. Will, a tall and talented junior who'd been exceptional enough as a painter to get into her graduate class, and who'd made himself known to her on the first day by pumping her hand as if she were a wrestling coach—a welcome if somewhat jolting occurrence after so many years of assumed fragility—stepped up to the painting and squinted at the adjacent title mounted on the wall. His jeans were tight and too short, very Eastern European and a refreshing break, Ludka thought, from the hanging bulks of denim slouching around campus. He absentmindedly flicked a finger back and forth along the half-dozen silver rings that cuffed his left ear as he ambled along the length of the painting.

“I see Will in the way,” someone said. A few students laughed.

“The color is something,” said Will. “It doesn't fit the mood.”

Ludka nodded, then glared around at the rest of them. They said the usual: the light and shadows, the realism—*it could be a photograph*—the way you could almost hear the violin from the street busker, although they didn't use that word. The young busker looked so eerily familiar that Ludka often wondered if she'd seen him in Warsaw back in '39, playing near the merchants' stalls in Rynek Starego or by the central fountain among picnicking families in Ogród Saski, or if he was simply another manifestation of Roslan's genius, a sort of everyman who touched those who cared to see him.

Although they tried so hard to sound erudite, none of her students saw beyond what was obvious, and she just kept asking until every one of them stopped trying to impress her and finally fell silent. One painfully quiet, solitary young woman—Sophie, who dressed more plainly than the others—gave Ludka hope; Sophie hadn't stopped staring at the Roslan and hadn't reacted to her classmates. The girl seemed a bit stricken, and that was appropriate.

“Yes,” Ludka whispered in her direction. Sophie appeared startled.

To the rest of the class Ludka said, “Now that you have stopped the guessing of what I might like to hear . . . *see*.”

Because this was an honors class, and because her frank approach made them think they were finally getting what they signed up for, they shuffled closer to the Roslan, squinted and strained. Annika, a skinny young woman wearing only a T-shirt and jeans, who always underdressed for the cold to showcase the tattoo sleeves on both arms, followed Will's lead and slowly walked the length of the painting, getting alternately closer and farther away. Sophie clutched her purse strap and closed her eyes. Ludka wanted to press her, to get her to tell these *dzieci* a thing or two, but for all Ludka's blustering she was not a teacher who put students on the spot. Sophie's hand strayed up to her throat and touched her buttoned cardigan as if she were toying with a necklace, which was, in fact, what she was doing. The gold cross was a new addition in the past year. She tucked it away only on campus.

Annika crossed her arms, cradling her elbows in her cupped hands. “Nobody's smiling,” she said. “Not one person.”

“And no one's carrying a book!” said Will. “What's up with that? In 1939 there should be at least one book, no?”

Ludka was shocked she'd never noticed the absence of books. Thus, she felt a fondness toward Will and immediately began to ponder Roslan's possible intention—clearly something to do with the imminent murders of the Polish intelligentsia, to which her parents had belonged. Ludka closed her eyes against the sudden pulsing of the cavernous room's pale walls. Even as a young woman she'd felt light-headed in museums, and she'd fallen in love with many a painting after latching on to it, a visual horizon from her unsteady boat. At the start of today's class she'd had to latch on to the Roslan to avoid alarming the students, an alarm she'd seen on the faces of those who'd beckoned her back from the dissociative episodes she and her husband, Izaac, were optimistically calling her reveries. The first time she'd had one, sitting in the garden at home last summer, Izaac had summoned her, his face inches from her own, and when she surfaced, he sank into his rocker, breathing as if he'd climbed the stairs to the attic. It had taken her a moment to realize he'd been calling to her in Polish, a rare departure from their decades-old covenant to speak English in America.

“Was I muttering?” she asked. Izaac shook his head.

“Again I was fifteen,” she said. “Like yesterday.”

They'd sat side by side, looking at the morning glories and the field and wetlands beyond, he wondering how much his heart could take should she precede him, she wondering if this was how her mind would go, if one day she'd no longer hear the summons.

Now Ludka praised Will for noticing what wasn't on the canvas, and then the murmuring began as the students finally started to talk about what Roslan had left out.

“Always,” she said, “I imagined Roslan had two studios, one for all his omissions.”

“What if he painted it all,” said Will, “and then covered it?”

“Ah! Now here is idea!”

She stood abruptly, remembering caution too late, and swayed for a moment, thin calves pressed into the edge of the bench, wool shawl clutched against her throat, gaze tethered to the Roslan. These were some of the teaching moments that made her happiest, when someone like Will shook her out of her own limited vision. She couldn't fathom that she'd missed this in her research, but imagine if it were true, if one could tease off the outer layer and read the signs and see the books and fill the empty grocers' bins! She could see why Roslan might go that route. Carefully she stepped away from the bench, and suddenly Will was beside her, commandeering her by the elbow, hustling her forward. Had he been anyone else, she would have tossed him off with a hiss, but she could sense his actions were more pragmatic than decorous, fueled by his desire for quick companionship to scrutinize the work. A not unpleasant aroma of warm wool arose from his threadbare peacoat, along with a hint of stale sweat. Once in front of the painting, he released her so gradually she knew he'd let go only when he stepped away and bent down to inspect the street busker's violin case. She searched for evidence that the missing books had been covered, and while she found none, she did marvel that she'd never noticed their now obvious absence, there in the cocked arms of the stooped old rabbi, for instance, or in the idling hand of the fey young man she'd always thought of as a poet; he reminded her of her father, a sculptor who'd been stronger than this young man, but possessed of a similar otherworldly sensibility.

"No evidence of covering," said Will. "Let's go with the two studios theory."

"There's a synagogue . . ." Sophie seemed surprised she had spoken aloud, and glanced at Ludka, who nodded at her to go on. "But there isn't a church?"

"Why do you think synagogue and not church?"

"Because it's a Jewish neighborhood," said Will.

"Or maybe," said Sophie, tentatively, "Mr. Roslan was anti-Christian? It's not uncommon."

“I can see that,” said Ashley, a chunky girl who excelled at oil portraits.

“I know, right?” said Sophie. “I don’t really see any evidence of God, do you?” Her hand strayed again to her neck. Ashley gravely shook her head.

“God?” said Will. “Seriously?”

“Well, there’s no joy. Anywhere.”

“What’s joy got to do with God?” said Will. “So they’re not joyful, so what? Would you be? It was 1939. They were about to get the crap bombed out of them. It’s got to be about the church’s collusion with the Nazis. That Rome turned away from the Jewish people, and, by the way, from the gypsies and Poles and mentally ill and disabled and”—here Will drew quotes in the air—“homosexuals. So, no church. But not *no God*.”

Bravo, thought Ludka.

“But not all Christians colluded, right?” said Sophie. “So it’s got to be more about Mr. Roslan’s perspective? I think maybe we should consider that he might have wanted to paint a city without Christians. He was a Jew, right? And the Jews did kill Jesus.”

“Seriously!” said Will.

Ludka felt a quickening near her heart, the flush of a once too-familiar adrenaline. She pulled the wool shawl farther down onto her shoulders and thought about returning to the bench. Why had she worn quarter-length sleeves on such a cold February day?

“And there are homosexuals,” said Sophie, lifting her chin toward the painting. She said “homosexuals” as if the word tasted bad.

“Meaning?” said Will. He considered the painting. “Those two guys? Seriously? I would have said scholars, but as you like it.”

“I don’t like it. I just noticed it.”

Ludka pulled the shawl more tightly around her.

“Who has something else to notice? From the rest of you, I’d like to hear.”

She hurried back to sit on the bench. She fruitlessly tugged her sleeves down past her elbows, marveling again that these were her forearms, with brown and reddish splotches daubed along the length of her papery skin. Only the pale underbelly, with parallel aqua veins running from her wrist to the crook of her elbow, was a ghost of the color of the fair skin she thought of as her own.

Ashley sidled over toward Sophie, the scuffing of her boots resounding in the cavernous space. She smiled shyly, and laid her hand for a long moment on Sophie’s shoulder, an unusually intimate and uncommon gesture for two strangers this early in the semester. This didn’t raise Ludka’s suspicions at the time, overshadowed as it was by Sophie’s distasteful tone when she spat out “homosexuals,” but later she would remember how easily and instinctively they’d joined forces and cite it as the moment in which she began to have concerns about them both.

What Ludka admired most about *Prelude, 1939* was that it captured the insularity of the people, the way they had so clearly huddled into themselves, individually or with one or two loved ones. There was no eye contact among any of them, not one glance, with one notable exception—the poor busker searched the faces of the passersby, pleading for even the briefest of connections. He got nowhere, and to Ludka’s mind his raised bow, jaunty with hope and forever suspended above his tilted, empty case, was the epicenter of the whole tragic painting.

Will asked if he could escort Ludka back to her office, and when they arrived, the art department’s administrative assistant flagged Ludka down as she unlocked her door.

“Message.”

Ludka pushed open the door, circled her desk, where she dropped her keys and soft leather satchel, and began to unfasten her black wool cape. Will tossed his backpack on some papers piled on a chair and turned his attention to her bookshelves.

“Stanley Brozek,” said the assistant. “Doing research on Polish artists from the World War II era. Looking for information on someone named Apolonia?”

Ludka froze. *Attention, Ludka, uwaga!* She fought the sudden gravity that threatened her bowels, that demanded she collapse into her chair. Unbidden, a dormant instinct honed to an art form nearly seventy years ago arose and assumed command, demanding she carefully compose her expression and glance as if nonchalantly out the window. No one in the quad seemed out of place.

“Take this, young man.” She cleared her throat. “Hang it there.”

Will took her cape and hung it behind the door. Ludka sat abruptly, betrayed by her old knees. She thought furiously, scanning her memory for a Stanley Brozek, hands anchored on her desk, fingers splayed and immobile, an old trick to steady herself, to curb instinctual rash action, to disguise anxiety. Sixty-three years since she’d been addressed as Apolonia, even by Izaac, who, like her, had shrouded certain pieces of their history in silence. The assistant handed her the note. Ludka didn’t trust her hands not to shake, so she flapped them impatiently at her in-box and cemented them again on her desk, a sudden damp sweat apparent in her palms. Will eagerly scanned the spines of her books. The assistant laid down the message and inched out the door, clearly anxious to be on her way.

“Specifically, he inquired for me by name?”

Ludka could hear the alarm in her voice, and when the assistant nodded, she rushed to cover it up, saying she would phone him on Monday. The assistant walked off, wishing them both a good weekend.

Will pulled a book off the shelf and leafed through it. "Can I borrow this?" He showed her the book, an introduction to abstract art in America, and suddenly she wondered who, exactly, he was. She searched his eyes, dark blue behind the narrow rectangles of his wire-framed glasses, and gave him a fierce look. He shifted his attention to the window behind her, then back to the book in his hands.

"There is library. From here, books disappear."

He didn't shy away, just smiled and slid the book back into its place. Unlike a lot of young men his age he stood to his full height, just over six feet, shoulders back, head high, an open and confident young man.

"Who's Apolonia?"

"Please, I must work!"

He seemed puzzled, and tugged the rings on his ear. She softened. He was a boy who liked art, nothing more. This was 2009, she must remember. A lifetime had passed. He knew nothing.

"I'm looking forward to seeing your collection," he said. "When is that, next week? You have a lot of abstract art, right?"

"From today, five weeks. The thirteenth of March."

He smiled and shouldered his backpack. "Want me to close the door?"

Ludka nodded. As soon as he was gone, she hurried to lock the door, then took hold of the cord on the venetian window blinds. After another scan of the quad she tugged to release the brake. She didn't hold tightly enough, and the slats came clattering down onto the sill, and this

was when she began to shake. She twisted the clear plastic rod and the slats pivoted in lockstep, obscuring the last of the day's sun. Ludka lowered herself carefully into her chair and took hold of the message. A California number, which of course meant nothing. He could be a continent away or outside in a car with his cell phone. Either way, he was too close.

Apolonia

In front of a wide fireplace, built by hand more than two centuries ago with stones extracted and hauled by horses from the nearby Adams River, Izaak was turning a page of the *New York Times* when he heard a car coming swiftly down the driveway.

More than fifty-five years ago, late one winter night when they'd been living in this house only a week, and Ludka was pregnant with their first son, Lolek, Izaak had woken in a panic. Ludka had heard a truck coming down the driveway and was shaking him, calling him Krzysztof Wincenty, the Polish name she had assigned him in 1940 when she'd spirited him out of the Warsaw ghetto to keep him hidden in her family's apartment from the Nazis. They were to use this name at all times, memorized with the fictitious life story of a Catholic cousin from Krakow. Izaak's real name had been forbidden, but Izaak chanted it, silently and incessantly, knowing even at ten years old that a person could willfully disappear. He'd never stopped incanting his name, even after reclaiming it in blotchy ink on the immigration papers on New York harbor's tarry dock, even after influential journals had given him countless bylines that had catapulted his civil rights career, even after he'd been elected attorney general. At eighty years of age, Izaak murmured it still—the way a more religious man might murmur his prayers: *My name is Izaak Szymon Rosenberg, Izaak Szymon Rosenberg*. But that first week in this house, hearing “Krzysztof Wincenty” in the dark bedroom, Izaak had sprung to attention and, like Ludka, had heard the rumble of a Nazi truck before he remembered where they were: America, postwar. It had snowed. The neighbor with his plow had kindly come to open up their driveway.

Now, all these years later, he still started when cars approached the house at unusual hours. He deftly closed the paper and folded it into quarters, leaned well forward and pushed off the arms of his chair to get himself up. His stature had collapsed with age and he slumped a bit, not burdened with a full-blown dowager's hump, but pitched enough to sling back his elbows for balance as he shuffled in his slippers to the back entrance hall. He eased aside the curtain covering the narrow window that flanked the door, just enough to peek out: Ludka, home unexpectedly early. He pulled open the door and waited behind the storm door, frigid air emanating from the glass. He held the paper in both hands behind his back. Ludka parked the car so it was facing back up the long driveway. Izaak frowned; it was customary to pull into the garage.

Ludka got out of the car, her spiked black galoshes clomping one at a time onto the dirty ice, her subsequent steps slow and cautious, left arm clutching her satchel's shoulder strap, the other cocked and held out to the side, as if reaching for a handrail. When she got to the door, he pushed it open. The cold air felt fine after the heat of the fireplace, and in it he detected the smell of oncoming snow.

"What's wrong?" He scrutinized her face. "What is it?"

"Let me in, Izaak."

His shoulders tensed. He stepped aside. Ludka unfastened her cape and hung it on one of the brass hooks they used in lieu of the coat closet, which they'd converted to storage for their paintings. Her eyes darted past him. She rapped her fist on his chest and gave him a little shove.

"Right, right." He gave her some space. She sat down in a straight-backed chair next to the door and bent over to unzip her galoshes.

"You're driving me to drink, here, *kochanie*. What is it?"

“No drinking! I need your wits. Someone has come looking for Apolonia.”

He would have expected an icy dread to descend at this exact moment. He had, in fact, in the early years, conjured that very feeling countless times by imagining such a scene as this, preparing for its inevitability. Now that it had arrived, he realized that the dreadful weight of anticipation that had burdened him all these years had been a misplaced concern, a habitual, unexamined holdover from another lifetime that should have been laid down the minute he stepped onto American soil in 1950. In this country, nothing could touch his Ludka, not back then, not now.

“Stanley Brozek. I’m wracking brain, Izaac. Who is he? This name is ringing a bell, but I cannot place it.”

Izaac tapped the paper lightly against his thigh. “I don’t know. Come.”

He tossed the newspaper on top of her galoshes to offer Ludka his arthritic hands, which were still good enough for leverage.

“Take a breath, kochanie, and come with me into the kitchen. I’m going to have a little drink and I suggest you do, too. One drink won’t shatter our wits. Come now.”

In the kitchen, while Ludka related the story of Brozek’s phone call, Izaac took a bottle of Belvedere out of the freezer and poured two small measures into crystal shot glasses. Ludka stooped to see out the pass-through from kitchen to dining area, scanning the view out the three-paneled French doors into the yard and field and wetland beyond, all of which were only palely illuminated by the mild light reflected from the snow. She had a vague sense that she was being overly alarmist, but she’d wound herself up tightly enough that she couldn’t begin to tease loose her more sensible mind. When she straightened up, the kitchen cabinets above the pass-through

obscured her view and she hit the closest cabinet once with the side of her fist, rattling the dishes inside.

“Already we should have torn these down. I’ve told you years and years and still you haven’t done this. How can I see? I break my neck, craning.”

Izaak gently took her hand, and put a shot glass into it.

“Look at me. Tell me what’s troubling you about this Stanley Brozek. Do you think he is some grudge-bearing Polish partisan or communist anti-Semite come all the way to Hampshire, Massachusetts, to persecute an old Jew-lover like you? This is not postwar Poland. The Ministry of Public Security has not found you out and come to shoot you. Who cares anymore about an old woman who rescued some Jews? This is decades beyond, this is America. Be reasonable. Even with the Nazis they just extradited—I read it in today’s *Times*—the Germans want to move on. ‘Whispers of enough,’ the paper says, and they’re talking about Demjanjuk! If no one wants to prosecute Demjanjuk for what he did at Treblinka and Sobibor, no one’s going to care about you defying the Nazis. Brozek’s probably a scholar, studying Polish art. He must have come across your sketches. He’s not skulking around in our garden, ready to break down our door. It’s a ridiculous notion.”

“Is that it? Is lecture over?”

Immediately she regretted her acerbic tone. Those sketches were the last she’d ever done, and she didn’t want to think about that. She did sound ridiculous, she knew, but Izaak did not know everything. She took a drink of the vodka, and the spreading warmth brought the promise of calm. Izaak leaned against the counter and closed his eyes, and Ludka felt her muscles begin to drain of the adrenaline that had propelled her for the last hour.

“No one will ever know I did sketches.”

“I’m not so sure about that. They found the archives shortly after the war.”

“I know this, Izaak, but it makes no difference. I did not sign them, only I tagged them with an *A*. Who would even know to trace them to Apolonia, much less to me?”

“Maybe Brozek is finally the excellent scholar who’s putting two and two together.”

She hadn’t considered this. If Brozek were to ask her outright if she was the artist, what would she say? She drank her vodka too fast; it hurt going down. Her greater concern, though, was that Brozek might suspect what else she had done. But even if he did suspect—and she hadn’t yet thought of a way this would be possible—he was far more likely to visit her at the office than he was to invade her home.

“I am ridiculous old woman, Izaak, you know this. This Brozek will want to stir the pot.”

“Maybe it’s time the pot got stirred. Maybe it’s time. And if it isn’t, if you really don’t want Brozek to know you’re Apolonia, don’t let him. It’s simple: tell him you know nothing and he’ll go away.”

He tossed up his hands as if dispatching a carrier pigeon. It amused her that she hadn’t thought of this simple solution, and then with a sudden and immediate clarity she knew why—she was wildly eager to learn what Brozek knew. She smiled at Izaak and thumped him on the forearm, not yet aware of the next thought that was pushing its way forward, that wouldn’t manifest until later tonight when they were in bed, lights off, Izaak lightly asleep: Stanley Brozek could be Oskar.

At St. Hedwig's

If Oskar had even survived the war, he would be eighty-six by now, and he certainly wouldn't be at St. Hedwig's for Sunday morning service. Nonetheless, as Ludka slowly walked the length of the nave, she checked each pew, studying all the unfamiliar old men, trying to reverse the years to see who might emerge as her former comrade. All day yesterday she had berated herself for leaving the phone number sitting in her in-box, and told herself that one more day after all these years wouldn't matter. And while it was certainly possible that Stanley Brozek was Oskar's given name, the name Ludka had never known, it was far more likely Stanley Brozek was a perfect stranger.

She took her usual seat three-quarters of the way into the third pew on the left, as always leaving room at the end for her older son, Lolek. He was the most powerful state senator in Massachusetts and came home from Boston to the district each weekend to attend church with his mother and Marta, his wife. In earlier years, their two children had come, too. Lolek and Marta always came in through the east entrance, and Lolek led them straight through the transept up to the crossing, so it would appear as if they were trying to slip in unnoticed, which of course never happened. Ludka herself didn't use the more convenient east entrance because she liked to walk all the way down the center aisle; Professor Zeilonka wasn't too high and mighty to attend mass, even if she never volunteered in the kitchen. At St. Hedwig's, as in every other Polish church, this was akin to sacrilege, and the other women gossiped about her, making things up in the absence of information, something about which Ludka was aware but stubbornly shoved from her mind. They complained to each other that she could do more to preserve their heritage

than decorate her traditional *pisanki* Easter eggs each year, a serious accusation given Poland's history of being repeatedly butchered by invading armies, the pieces divvied up among the occupiers like so many cuts of lamb. It was critical Poles stick together, and for these women the best way to persevere was through simmering pots of *bigos* or boiling *pierogis* or baking a pan of *klopsiki*. They had only a vague idea that Ludka had already accomplished far more in the eyes of historians for the preservation of Polish culture than centuries of church bazaars. Ludka was also, of course, married to a Jew, and not just any Jew, but the first Jewish attorney general in Massachusetts, something most people, including Izaak himself, could hardly believe had come to pass. But Izaak's predecessor had not been an honest man, which opened an unexpected midterm vacancy. Izaak's prominence, then, coupled with their influential son, put Ludka in a league of her own.

There was a stir from the people nearby, and Ludka knew that Lolek and Marta had arrived. She felt a little start of excitement to see that Tommy, her grandson, was with them. He was thirty-six, an English teacher at Adams River High School, but Ludka still saw him as an overgrown boy, with soft skin and his father's large ears and misbehaving hair. When he saw Ludka, he lifted his chin in acknowledgement and moved past his parents. Lolek was shaking hands, with Marta tight-lipped beside him, looking as if she'd rather be anywhere else. Tommy genuflected and slid into the pew next to Ludka, put an arm around her, and kissed her cheek.

"*Babcia!*" he said.

Ludka regarded him quizzically. Tommy only ever came to church at Christmas and Easter. He withdrew his arm from her shoulders.

"I could stand to pray." He avoided eye contact. "Miss me? How's *Dziadzio*?"

"*Dziadzio* is *Dziadzio*, happy at home with his *New York Times*."

Tommy smiled like this was the best news he'd heard in a long time.

"I'd love to wear a cape like this," he said, fingering Ludka's sleeve. "Wouldn't that be so dashing? I'd have to move to London or Paris. Or maybe New York. They'd drum me out of Hampshire in a heartbeat."

He sounded sullen, and his right leg bounced up and down. Ludka laid her hand on it and he stopped, sighed, and lowered his head as if in prayer.

"What's trouble?"

Tommy pushed his fingers under his round, wire-rimmed glasses and rubbed his eyes.

"After mass you will come back to house. Tell me and Dziadzio." Tommy nodded.

The congregation had filled in behind and around them, and the church resonated with rustles and murmurs, the cadences of English and Polish all blending together. St. Hedwig's was a glorious church, classified as a minor basilica, in deference to St. Peter's in Rome. Ludka had chosen it not only for its Polish congregation and its beauty, but because it reminded her so much of the church in which she'd grown up: Bazylika Archikatedralna święty Jana—St. John's. Gray marble columns flanked St. Hedwig's nave and held aloft the intricately carved arches—sky blue and gilt-edged—that crowned the clerestory and framed its stained glass. In the sanctuary, just above the priest's chair, rose a large painting of the famous Black Madonna of Częstochowa, and when the sun hit it just right, at this time of year usually toward the end of the Eucharist, the Virgin Mary and her holy son shone as if a brilliant sun had risen before them. The church had weathered a lot since its erection in 1889, including a near schism during the Second World War that almost closed its doors, and a fire in 1991 that destroyed enough to make the renovation more like a rebuilding. The fire wasn't caused by ancient wiring as everyone suspected, but by an arsonist who hit more than one church in the area and was disappointed when he saw mostly

thick black smoke billowing from St. Hedwig's, not the flames he had imagined licking at the feet of Christ on the Cross. In fact, once the damage was assessed, Ludka and Izaak's younger son, Frank, who had been a volunteer firefighter at the time and was now the fire chief in the nearby city of Huntsfield, wondered if perhaps it was a miracle that Jesus was untouched despite the char and ash all around him. Then his mother told him the legend of the painting of the Black Madonna of Częstochowa, how back in the twelfth century, in its first home in Jerusalem, its holy presence was said to have saved the church from fire. Frank had momentarily considered returning to his mother's church, the church of his childhood, but quickly caught himself—the shadow of his brother had already been too heavily cast at St. Hedwig's. Ludka had long since given up on bringing Frank back, although she still missed his weekly presence in what she thought of as the family pew.

Now the organ increased in volume, and the people quieted. Ordinarily this was the time Ludka would close her eyes, working to keep in check her deepest yearnings for her home country, yearnings that inevitably arose from the familiar ancient mass and the murmurings in Polish. But today Ludka kept her eyes open. She craned her neck, searching in every direction until Tommy gave her an inquiring look, at which point Ludka methodically studied the backs and sides of every old man's face she could see without turning around.

Marta settled into the pew and leaned across Tommy to smile at Ludka. Lolek genuflected and crossed himself, groaning inwardly as his hips and thighs pushed too tightly against the fabric of his pants, as his waistband pressed into his gut. He took off his overcoat, draped it over the end of the pew, and then reached out a hand toward Ludka, palm down. He flapped his fingers.

“Dzień dobry, Matka.”

“*Dzień dobry*, Lolek.”

And then Father Skurski was there at the altar, and everyone stood and made the sign of the cross.

“In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.”

After murmuring *Amen*, the congregants were meant to turn inward to reflect on their own relationships with God, as channeled through the ages-old liturgy and the presence of the priest. Some of them still missed the lyricism of the Latin and wished the sign of peace that interrupted their reflections had never been instituted, but Ludka was not one of those. She believed strongly in offering her hand to others, because despite personal experience littered with examples to the contrary, despite the pessimism of history, she was still at heart an optimist who wanted to believe that even a small connection like a proffered handshake could make a difference should push come to shove.

For Lolek, mass was the one hour in his week when he could retreat into himself and cease to be a senator, and for most of the service, except when he prayed, he took in only the church itself, not the faces of the people, not even Father Skurski. He had trained himself to relax into the cadence of the mass, the scent of the incense, and the beauty of the basilica. Today, though, because of his foul mood, he had trouble letting go. His son had just angrily dismissed him in the parking lot, and Marta had been utterly silent on the drive over. He felt too heavy inside his suit, his armpits stuffed tight with three layers of fabric from his undershirt, Oxford, and jacket. Next to him, Marta’s eyes were closed, head tipped up, hands resting on the back of the pew in front of them. She wore her wedding band, engagement ring, and mother’s ring with two birthstones all on the same finger, a bit crowded, Lolek thought. And what in God’s name was his mother

doing, glowering around at the crowd? He was startled to find Tommy eyeing him warily.

Tommy quickly averted his gaze and faced Father Skurski.

“Lord have mercy,” said the priest.

When it came time for communion, the organ music escalated and the whole family rose and moved in a line along the pew toward the center aisle. As Ludka stepped out into the aisle before Tommy, a man from the end of the pew behind them took hold of Tommy’s jacket sleeve and held him fast.

“Don’t you dare take communion,” said the man, loud enough to compete with the organ.

Brozek, thought Ludka insensibly, and turned just in time to see Tommy pulling back against the man’s grasp, trying to extricate himself, a panicked look on his face. Without thinking, Ludka reached out and smacked the man’s forearm.

“Desist!”

“No need to make a scene,” the man said to Ludka. And then to Tommy, almost conspiratorially, he said, “I heard all about you, son. Just sit back down.”

People were peering around now for the source of the disturbance, and Lolek and Marta had crowded out into the aisle.

“Mr. Kulek,” said Lolek. “What’s this about? Is there a problem?” The man seemed surprised that Lolek knew his name.

“No problem, Senator.” He let go of Tommy’s sleeve, and the release catapulted Tommy’s arm back across his own chest in an angry-looking gesture. Kulek circled around them and hustled forward to join the dwindling communion line. Ludka glared at him.

“And so it begins,” murmured Tommy.

“What begins?” said Lolek.

Ludka gestured toward the altar, but Tommy shook his head. At first it seemed like he'd go back into the pew, but then he turned away and strode down the center aisle, trying—and failing—to walk as naturally as if the service had come to an end. The people were polite and tried not to stare, but most cast sidelong glances as he passed. Those who'd somehow missed the commotion admired the cut of his Gibson London jacket. One of his students pressed her hand over her mouth to suppress a giggle and elbowed her friend, who looked him over with obvious appreciation. Still others perceived it was all he could do not to break into a run. Tommy finally made it to the foyer. He ignored the holy water in its marble font, pushed through the enormous wooden door, and stepped out into the cold February morning.

The chill of the air outside felt almost warm compared to the stillness inside the church, and Tommy breathed it in, trying to calm himself. Less than a block away, a raucous group of people burst out of the wide entrance of the old Regent Theatre that five years ago had become home to the Hampshire Redeemer Fellowship. As if they were heeding a fire drill, the people quickly burgeoned into a thick and steady stream flowing out onto the sidewalk. Tommy squinted through the direct sunlight at the crowd, certain the superintendent of schools would be among them, the one person he wanted to avoid. He started down the stairs, but behind him the door opened and Ludka emerged, the spikes of her galoshes click-clacking on the granite. She detoured over to the black iron handrail to make her way down, and Tommy retraced his steps and offered her his arm.

“What the hell are the fundamentalists putting in their sacramental wine?” Tommy inclined his head toward the crowd. “I didn't think the old Regent could hold that many.”

Ludka gave the crowd a passing glance, then peered intently at Tommy, who was surveying the crowd as if they might attack.

“What’s trouble?” She gave his arm a little shake. “Tell Babcia.”

Tommy sighed, closed his eyes, and lifted his face to the sun. After a moment, he glanced behind him at the doors to the church and said, “He’s not coming, is he.”

Ludka shook her head. “But your mother already is right behind, after communion. We will wait here for her.”

“The devout senator.”

Ludka winced at his bitter tone but knew enough to keep silent.

Most of the fellowship’s congregation were gathered in groups in front of the old theater or out on the sidewalk, and many others walked past St. Hedwig’s, heading for the municipal parking lot less than a block away. Thigh-high piles of freshly shoveled snow bordered the sidewalks, and in the parking lot a group of kids clambered up a huge snow pile and pushed each other down, jockeying to be the next King of the Mountain. Ludka realized with some surprise that she didn’t know anyone who belonged to the Regent—as she thought of it—although just then someone called hello, and there were Sophie and Ashley from class. Ludka gave them a little wave and they walked on, their heads nearly touching as they conversed.

Hampshire wasn’t a small town, but it also wasn’t so large that people didn’t know each other, especially people affiliated with the university who’d been around as long as Ludka had, and she wondered where all these people had suddenly come from, and when. It seemed the old cinema was a hive full of strangers, disgorging its congregants into animated clusters; it unsettled her. Still, like America herself, Hampshire had a history of welcoming immigrants—most notably the Poles—and Ludka supposed that just like the Poles, the new people had fallen in love with the town and encouraged a surge of their friends to join them. Nothing wrong with that. The Poles, though, no matter which century, had come to America largely to escape something:

unemployment, foreign occupation, Communist oppression, and ethnic discrimination. Ludka and Izaak were no exception. They'd looked with hope to America for safe harbor, and they'd found it. But what was the story with these people? They were not foreigners, but Americans. She pulled the edges of her shawl out of the neck of her cape and snugged them up against her chin.

“Will you come see Dziadzio, Tommy?”

“I've been fired, Babcia.” Tommy spoke calmly, but she could feel him trembling. “I need to talk to all of you, back at the house. You'll need to be prepared.”

###

Enjoyed This Excerpt?

Learn more about THIS IS HOW IT BEGINS, and pre-order today:

<http://thisishowitbeginsnovel.com/>