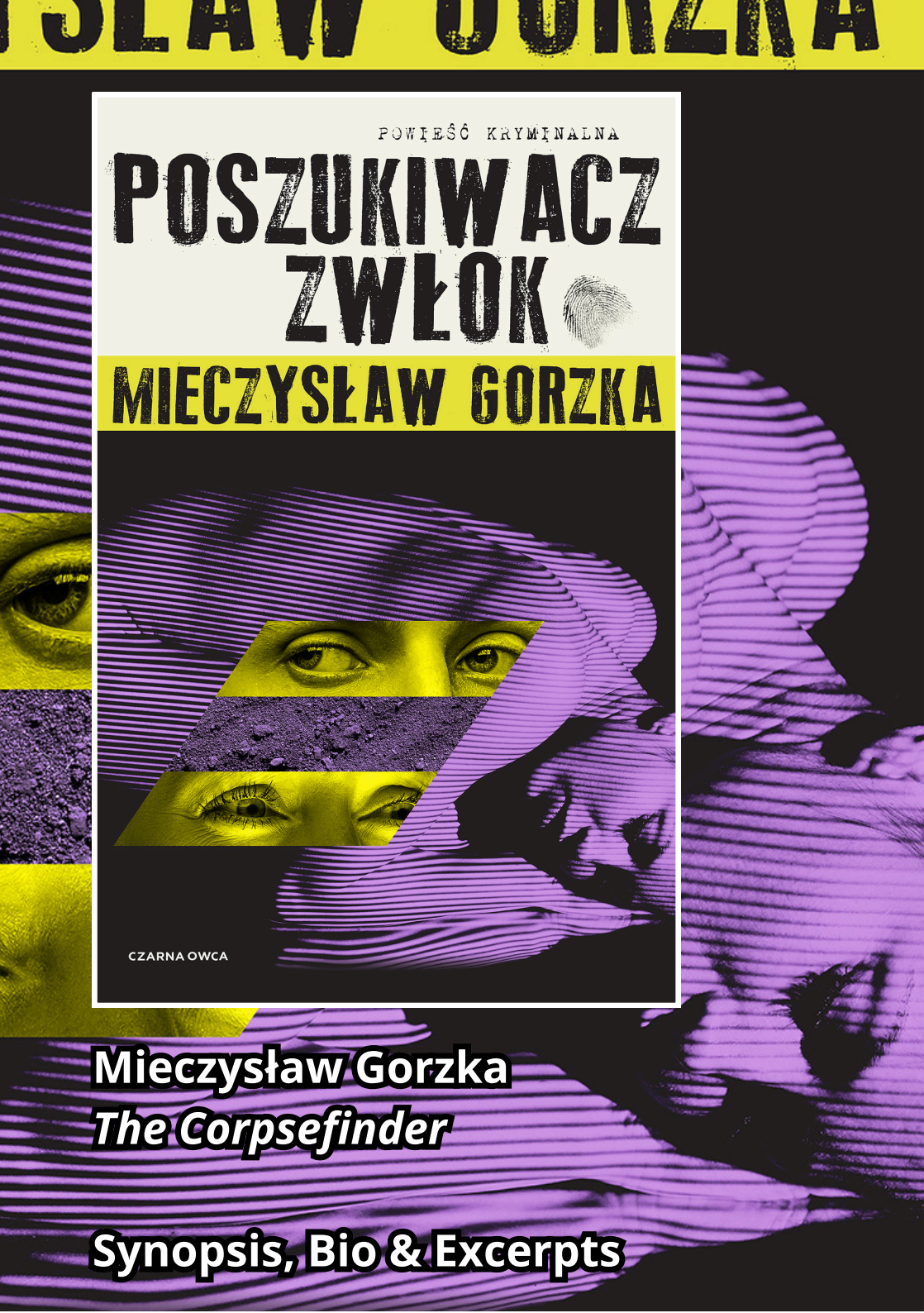


Mieczysław Gorzka
The Corpsefinder

Synopsis, Bio & Excerpts

Mieczysław Gorzka

About the author

Mieczysław Gorzka is a writer and entrepreneur with a background in economics. **He is the author of science fiction, fantasy, thriller, crime, and horror novels.**

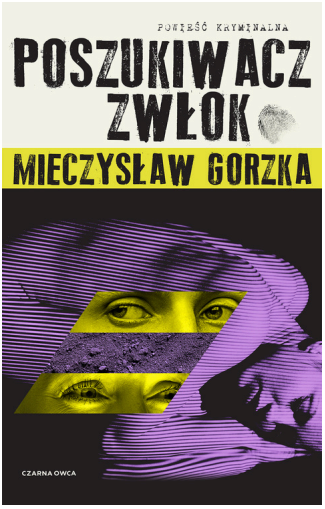
A devoted coffee enthusiast, drinking at least four cups a day, he also has a deep interest in the medieval history of Silesia, quantum physics, and cosmology. In his spare time, he enjoys home brewing.

At Czarna Owca, he has launched a new crime series featuring female inspector Laura Wilk.

The Corpsefinder

Mieczysław Gorzka

Women in Crime



August 2023
480 pages
English excerpts and synopsis available

3.9/728 ratings/ 87 reviews

7.5/ 2 575 ratings/ 522 reviews

Detective Laura Wilk leads a team of investigators working on the brutal murders of teenage girls, but tensions within the criminal division make the case even more challenging. Then, one of the agents is murdered. Suddenly, Wilk realises the situation is far more serious – and far more dangerous – than she ever imagined.

Meanwhile, Maciej Lesiecki, a psychologist who works closely with the police, finds himself entangled in his own unresolved childhood traumas. Then, an unknown woman approaches him with an unsettling request – she wants him to find the remains of a young girl who vanished years ago. He accepts the task, but the case is anything but straightforward and soon pulls him into a web of danger.

Despite battling her own demons, Detective Laura Wilk steps in to help Lesiecki. But neither of them realises they are walking straight into a trap…

TheCorpsefinder is perhaps Mieczysław Gorzka's boldest book, revealing gruesome crimes and deep psychological traumas. An absolutely gripping story. Highly recommended!

Marcin Waincetel, editor-in-chief of kulturakryminalu.pl

- **Over 50,000 copies sold in Poland alone**
- **A deeply nuanced psychological portrayal of the characters, with psychology itself playing a key role**
- **A gripping portrait of the small-town oligarchy emerging in Poland in the 1990s**

Do not ask for mercy – for there is no God. Do not show weakness – or you will lose the respect of others… Only you can help yourself…

Ariel

The Corpsefinder

Synopsis by Dawid Mobolaji

The Corpsefinder is a gritty psychological crime thriller set between the city streets of Wrocław and the nefarious underworld of small-town Poland. Its plot focuses on two overlapping investigations: one chasing a brutal serial killer, the other exposing a buried political scandal with lethal consequences.

Central characters include **Inspector Laura Wilk** – nicknamed "the She-Wolf" – a sharp and uncompromising detective newly assigned to a stalled serial murder case, and **Maciej Lesiecki**, known in his childhood as **Ariel**, a criminologist and psychologist with a dark past and a unique talent for finding corpses. **Inspector Piotr Żołnierz ("Sarge")** is Laura's bitter predecessor: an unstable, substance-using cop with criminal ties, who becomes an unpredictable threat to both the investigation and their lives. His sidekick, **Hubert Góralski ("Grizz"),** is feeding intel on Sarge to the internal police watchdog, to cover up his own crimes. Their nicknames reflect the meanings of their surnames in Polish: wilk means wolf, żołnierz means soldier, while góralski refers to the mountain-dwelling Goral people (here loosely translated as a reference to grizzly bears, also associated with mountains).

The story opens with the eighth victim of a serial killer, dubbed the Poltergeist, found mutilated in the woods near Wrocław. The case, languishing for years under Sarge's watch, gains new momentum when Laura notices a missed detail – wood shavings at the scene – linking the crimes to a local carpentry workshop. Driven by spite against Laura, Sarge sabotages the case by arriving early at the carpentry workshop and tipping off the suspect. A police officer witnesses this and tries to blackmail Sarge, who ends up killing the man by pushing him off a viaduct into the path of an incoming train.

Ariel/Maciej gets drawn into the Poltergeist case due to his relationship with Laura, initially purely physical. Soon, she realises he had previously pinpointed the site of the first victim's body, which sparked his career as "the Corpsefinder". His behaviour becomes increasingly erratic, haunted by flashbacks to childhood trauma and to fantasies of violence against women, including recollections of stalking them in his car. When his girlfriend Sonia disappears, the reader begins to suspect him as a possible perpetrator.

Simultaneously, Maciej is hired by Iga Marek – the director of a private, London-based security agency – to find the remains of her cousin, Maria Cybulska, a young woman who vanished years earlier in the town of Świdnica, near Wrocław. Eventually, the She-Wolf aids him with the search. This thread leads deep into a corrupt criminal underworld, run by old gangsters with a lot of local sway, members of a kind of "small-town oligarchy". Maria's father, Ryszard Cybulski, a former mobster turned high-ranking official, and his brutal associate Krzysztof Darski, are revealed to have run wild parties involving drugs, sex workers and influential guests in the 90s, and it's during one of these that Maria went missing.

As Maciej and Laura close in, both come under direct attack from the criminal syndicate desperate to keep the case hidden in a tense action sequence. Sarge, now fully compromised by the mob, attempts to have Laura framed for drug possession, but with Grizz's covert help, she escapes barefoot through the backstreets, narrowly outrunning her pursuers before finding refuge in her sister's home. Maciej, too, is abducted by this mafia, locked in a car boot and driven to the outskirts of town, only to break free and kills his captors. Both survive, barely, and regroup in hiding. They interrogate an informant who confesses: Maria had stolen documents from her father, threatening to reveal secrets implicating very powerful individuals. She was killed on Darski's orders, as was the bodyguard who carried out the job. The climax sees the criminal network implode. Cybulski is found dead in a staged suicide, while Darski is shot – both eliminated by the mob for posing too much trouble. Iga Marek is, in fact, Maria Cybulska – she survived when the bodyguard spared her life, now desperate to uncover her father's wrongdoings.

Meanwhile, Maciej follows written clues to the Poltergeist keeping his girlfriend captive and finds her murdered. At first, he becomes the suspect, however his alibi is confirmed. He recovers lost memories, realising that the previous flashbacks suggesting him to be the killer are false, the result of childhood trauma.

Ultimately, the She-Wolf follows the latest lead: the carpentry workshop near the latest crime scene belonged to Sarge's father. Suspicions fall on Sarge, by now revealed to be a mob hitman in uniform. He dies at the workshop in a final shootout with the police.

The Poltergeist, however, is still active. One final body is found after Sarge's death, clearly signalling he was not the real killer. Ariel and Laura, now joined by mutual trust and loss, vow to keep hunting the real Poltergeist – who seems to have been circling Ariel all along.

Dawid Mobolaji is a Polish-Nigerian literary translator, writer, and physician based in London. He works between English and his native Polish. In 2023, he completed the Emerging Translator Mentorship program at the National Centre for Writing in Norwich, UK.

The Corpsefinder

Sample translated by Dawid Mobolaji

Extract 1
Chapter 3 (pp. 27—30)

[This extract introduces the sharp and relentless inspector Laura Wilk ("the She-Wolf"), as she takes over an ongoing serial killer case. It serves as a structural turning point that resets the investigation and shifts the narrative's moral compass. Her involvement intensifies the stakes: not only in terms of solving the murders, but also in surviving the criminal and political forces already working to push her out.]

Inspector Laura Wilk – mockingly dubbed the She-Wolf by colleagues – was just turning off the main road, slowly guiding the car over rough terrain between fields thick with grain. She headed for the cluster of trees near the motorway. There was a time when her nickname at the Criminal Division of Wrocław Regional Police would piss her off. But she quickly learned to brush it off. Later, she even started to like it. Male chauvinism in the department was alive and well, and as a young officer, she'd regularly been met with crude comments and propositions – to which she mostly wanted to answer with her fist. And once or twice, she did just that. It worked – very well and very quickly.

That was probably why they'd started calling her the She-Wolf. From then on, all the sexual innuendos stopped. "She-Wolf" came off sounding tough, proud and dangerous. The colleagues had played themselves: the menacing nickname they'd given her was the reason they finally started treating her with respect – like a partner – not some militant feminist who looked for fulfillment in a hypermasculine profession she just

wasn't cut out for. But Laura fit. She fit bloody perfectly and she proved it, time and again, by putting psychos behind bars. Most of the male detectives from the Criminal Division were less of a fit for the officer position than her. She outshone them constantly – and paid for it. Dirty looks, snide comments behind her back, at times petty traps laid along her career path.

In any case, there was less of it now. Only a few corrupt bastards left, who still looked at her like she was only good for washing dishes, spreading her legs, and getting richer squeezing out kids, thanks to state handouts. But she'd deal with them eventually, too. She couldn't stand traitors in the force, and if she had solid proof, she would've cut them down to size long ago. It was hard. But it was just a question of time. She'd deal with them.

One such hardened detective constantly undermining her in each and every way was Sarge. Now that she was finally replacing him in leading the investigation into the Poltergeist, she was expecting all-out war. And she didn't give a damn.

Laura Wilk was thirty-six years old. Allergic to children, long-term relationships, love, and all those curses that made people lose their minds. She was immune. In all her life, there'd only ever been one man for whom she had a soft spot – but even then, it wasn't enough to start planning a life together. She couldn't picture sharing a home with a member of the opposite sex – going to the same toilet, using the same bathtub, then ultimately sleeping in the same bed. Why did people do that to themselves? Besides, relationships were shackles. Instead of doing whatever she wanted, she'd have to consider someone else's opinions – and then, they'd have completely different ideas about what to do. Not to mention sex. In this regard, she preferred full freedom. She went to bed with whoever she wanted, whenever she felt like it. Despite the rumours flying around the station, she was most definitely straight. Women didn't interest her. They

didn't have the one thing that turned her on the most in sex – and the fake alternatives only disgusted her.

She carried herself like a man ever since the early school years. Friends used to always say that there must've been a glitch in God's order of distributing body and mind – that Laura should've been born a boy instead. She didn't agree with this sentiment. She was one hundred percent woman, and the fact she never dressed like one didn't change anything. She'd even cut her fair hair short, since the long curls would annoy her. And when she heard snide remarks about how instead of a beautician she goes to a barber, she'd answer with a weak, condescending smile.

She had no idea who she would've become if she hadn't decided, very early in life, to join the police. No point even wondering about it. She was born to hunt down freaks, perverts and murderers. The worst of them at that. It was her main purpose in life.

She'd always believed she was the only one in the division capable of catching the Poltergeist, but it was only now that she got the chance – the eighth body in the span of five years had been found. The chief finally came to his senses, stopped bowing to peer pressure, and made the only right call: he gave Laura the audit of the investigation so far. He'd also reached an agreement with the prosecutor's office. The new prosecutor, Sobocinski, was her friend – they'd always worked together and got along well. Although he had the reputation of being soft, he was open-minded and unafraid of challenges. With Laura, they always got good results.

As it happened, just the day before, she'd met informally with the division chief and the regional police commissioner and presented the audit findings. Within thirty minutes, the decision to dismiss Sarge and appoint her as the team leader was made. Then, at dawn, the unfortunate message about a new body had come. The Poltergeist was back.

Extract 2
Chapter 5 (pp. 44—49)

[This scene follows Inspector Piotr Żołnierz ("Sarge") as he seethes with envy and resentment after being removed from the Poltergeist case and replaced by Laura. He chooses sabotage over justice – a decision that shifts the momentum of the case and sets in motion the chain of corruption, cover-ups and violence that ripple through the rest of the novel.]

Inspector Piotr Żołnierz leaned against the bonnet of his unmarked police car, nervously puffing on a cigarette. He was surprised to observe how the hate worked within him. It was certainly insidious – overpowering. The few minutes of talking to Laura Wilk at the crime scene of yet another murdered girl had been enough to detonate his dislike for her – with the strength of the Hiroshima bomb. It quickly wreaked havoc in his way of thinking, redefined his priorities and changed his day-to-day functioning. For a moment, he'd felt like a real cop again, whose only goal was to catch the killer, but then hate changed everything. It acted like a toxin, killing all positive thoughts and human emotions inside him. A wave of negative thoughts replaced them.

He no longer wondered what he would do to the degenerate butchering young girls – that suddenly became irrelevant. Instead, he started thinking about what he would do to the She-Wolf if only he could get his hands on her. The tragedy of the victims also became irrelevant and distant. Unexpectedly, it was the killer who now felt closer. Sarge wanted him at large for as long as possible, so he could keep on killing. It didn't matter how much more death, blood and suffering there would be. All that mattered was for the She-Wolf to get burned on that case, for her to get

dismissed as soon as possible, and – just for a moment – feel what he'd felt when he suddenly got the news of the division chief's decision. She deserved to suffer, the bitch. Deserved to taste defeat.

But things were turning out completely differently. He ground his teeth in impotent rage. The lead with the wood shavings had been very good. That same day, they'd checked every carpentry workshop in town that processed pinewood. Surprisingly, there weren't that many. The challenge came later. They took lists of current and ex-employees from each company, all of which had to be screened. If the killer had the wood shavings on his shoes during the most recent murder, he must've been employed in carpentry or running a business of his own. That's what they focused on. The entire investigative division collected data. Within a single day, they knew everything. They quickly named five suspects, then narrowed the list down to three. They'd never been this close to the Poltergeist before. All thanks to the She-Wolf's sharp eye. That stung the most.

The criminal division chief authorised a forced entry into the carpentry workshop as soon as the list of suspects had shrunk to just one name. Miłosz Sobczak. Forty-three. Single. No criminal record, no family ties. A recluse and painfully obsessive perfectionist who lived his life by the clock. An ideal candidate for a psychopathic serial killer. The longer they surveilled him, the more convinced they were. The guy didn't use a mobile phone and there was no trace of him online. He only had a landline. In today's fucked-up world, it was hard to find a phantom like this, who didn't leave tracks anywhere. Until, that is – due to oversight or excessive nonchalance – he brought wood shavings to where his body dump site.

Sarge's phone rang.

'Yes?' he answered, not even recognising his voice.

‘Grizz here,’ his friend said. ‘Where the hell are you? We’re getting ready to go in.’

‘I’m stuck in town,’ he lied. ‘Tying up a loose end.’

‘What loose end?’ There was a note of surprise in Grizz’s voice.

‘Do you really want to know?’ Sarge said brusquely.

‘Maybe not.’

‘I’ll be on time. Don’t stress.’

Piotr pocketed the phone and looked towards the building across the street – one-level and somewhat neglected. Its dirty windows were unlikely to inspire trust in potential customers, and in the past hour, the place hadn’t seen a living soul. Even the sign over the wide entrance, proclaiming to the world that this was a carpentry workshop, didn’t do its job in attracting clients. The gate to the property was open, with both sides of the front yard stacked with planks and boards, protected against rain with tarpaulin. Debris lay scattered about the place. It seemed to be waste products – or signs of a less-than-skilled carpenter.

Sarge had parked away from the street, in a small parking area by a grocery shop. He didn’t want his colleagues spotting him – the workshop had been under constant surveillance for at least two days. He’d read the reports. They said the owner would occasionally drive a van to the warehouse for materials, but never for long. One agent believed the suspect actually lived at the workshop.

After a while, Sarge located the unmarked car. They’d done a decent job of camouflaging, parked at a junction with a side street, behind a battered Vauxhall Vectra – it must’ve been there for years, awaiting its final ride to the scrapyard. He couldn’t enter from the front – they would see him. He also couldn’t pretend to be a customer this early in the day – he’d arouse their suspicion. The only option was the back. Earlier, he’d confirmed that the workshop backed onto a private home. The tall hedge, significantly

outgrowing the fencing, did well to ensure the privacy of the house's residents and probably partly dampened the noise from the machines.

He checked his gun one last time, got out the car, rushed a cigarette, observing the area, and finally stepped onto the pavement. He moved away from the surveillance car by the rusty old banger. He was wearing a baseball cap and dark sunglasses, slightly hunched his back and favoured his right leg. Even if they did see him – which was unlikely – such camouflage would keep him away from suspicion. Simple methods were always the most effective.

He approached the nearest pedestrian crossing. He stood, waiting for one of the cars to let him go. It didn't take long: the idea that pedestrians had absolute priority at zebra crossings had begun to take root in the drivers' minds.

This used to be some village, now swallowed up by the expanding city of Wrocław. Traffic was light, the area sleepy and quiet. He looped around a couple of streets and found himself at the rear of the single-floor building rented by the workshop.

It was dead silent all around, as if nobody were inside, which would make sense given the drawn shutters in all the windows. Except the back door – ajar – suggested otherwise. [...]

Sarge continued towards the sounds. Something was off here. In a place where wood got cut using enormous saws and furniture was assembled using the pieces, there should've been lots of light. Instead, the room was steeped in half-darkness. The drawn shutters kept out the rays of sun. The ceiling lamps were switched off. Against the glow of a lamp lighting a workbench deep inside the space, he saw only the outline of the man, his back turned away. He took two steps forward and raised his gun.

'Police! Stay where you are!' he spat.

The man froze.

‘Drop the tool and get your hands up!’ the officer commanded.

No reaction.

‘I’m counting to five, then I shoot!’

The guy put aside the drill driver and straightened. He was tall and well-built, but not quite as tall or broad as Piotr.

‘Hands up! I want to see your hands!’

The man in the shadows obeyed the order, lifting his arms in a fluid motion.

‘Now turn around!’

For a long while, they stared at each other in silence. A strange scene. Sarge couldn’t see his face clearly. Only his eyes gleamed, like two diamonds, emitting a cold glow.

‘What gave me away?’

The timbre of his voice was surprisingly pleasant. He didn’t show as much as a hint of anxiety. He’d probably reckoned with the fact that police would one day track him down and he’d be caught. Still, his pose surprised the officer.

‘The wood shavings,’ he replied.

The Poltergeist was silent, analysing, then finally shook his head. It seemed to Piotr that something akin to a smile had flashed across his face.

‘The wood shavings,’ he sighed. ‘Fair enough. That tracks.’

Another silence stretched.

‘So what now?’ He seemed genuinely curious as to what awaited him. ‘Am I under arrest? Are you going to handcuff me?’

But Sarge had other plans for him.

‘In a few minutes, the area will be swarming with police,’ he said. ‘We’ve had eyes on you for many hours. Get moving – you don’t have long.’

There was another pause, before the killer understood the meaning of these words.

Extract 3

Ariel – Many Years Ago (pp. 8—13)

[Ariel Lesiecki is a neurotic criminologist and therapist with a gift for locating bodies, whose past may hold the key to the Poltergeist murders. The following is a flashback to Ariel's traumatic adolescence, when he was relentlessly bullied for his name and perceived difference. It plants early doubt about whether his early experiences have imbued him with the capacity for darker action – a question that becomes central to the plot as Maciej/Ariel moves from consultant to suspect. At the end of the novel, the reliability of his memory and these flashbacks is called into question.]

He hated the number thirteen. It brought bad luck, drew misfortune, and always landed him in trouble. Ariel was thirteen years old, and there was nothing he could do about that – except wait it out. As if that weren't enough, his house number was thirteen, too. At school, the number thirteen – vile and ill-boding – was the one assigned to his name on the class register. All of it beyond his control. He was convinced the number was cursed, constantly bringing trouble his way out of malice. Like now.

For the time being, the sounds of the chase were still behind him. He paused for a moment to catch his breath. He was hiding behind the bark of a large tree, somewhere inside the unkempt park overgrown with bushes. He'd let himself be cornered here. There was nowhere else left to run.

They were four chasing him. Classmates he despised – always taunting him and making fun of his name. Because, *what kind of name is Ariel?* Like the laundry detergent. It had never occurred to their moronic minds that Ariel was the name of an airy spirit in a play by a great foreign writer. He'd help noble Prospero in bringing vengeance upon the wicked. Ariel had tried to explain, but nobody would listen. To most of them, he

was detergent. And that's how he felt sometimes. Insignificant, trivial, invisible, ignored. As if he were nothing – nobody. Like laundry powder, like dust. Sometimes, as he drifted off to sleep, he'd imagine himself dissolving into air and wondered if anyone would even notice. Probably not.

The classmates didn't just bully him for his name, but also for the fact he was different. Intelligent, gentle, sensitive. And most likely because he was smarter than them. He got top grades, read a lot, spoke well, minded his manners, respected his elders. He never caused trouble. He didn't drink cheap wine or smoke cigarettes behind the school. Half the idiots chasing him would probably never attain the level of intelligence he had long reached. He was totally different. He didn't belong here. The small village outside the city couldn't tolerate misfits. Freaks of nature who didn't conform to the pitifully low average have always been persecuted. Witch hunts hadn't ever gone away – they just looked different now. If he'd been alive in those days, they'd have surely burned him at the stake.

A twig snapped to his right. He took off running.

'He's here!' one of the bullies shouted behind him gleefully.

Ariel ran blind, the brambles tearing at his arms and legs. He ducked to avoid the branches viciously whipping his face. Even the trees were against him. Because everyone was against the weak and "the other". Even God.

He burst onto a small meadow and knew immediately where he was. A hundred metres off or so, he saw the ruins of an old palace. It had once belonged to a landowner who also owned several nearby villages. But all power passes. Historical tides of change overturn and destroy everything. The palace had now fallen into disrepair, its surrounding park looking more like a wilderness than a place for walks and quality time on hot summer days. Even the pond in front of the palace had turned to swamp, overgrown with aquatic plants.

Ariel sprinted with all the strength he had left, pushing through tall grass. The bullies were closing in. The four of them now emerged on all four sides of the meadow, cheering at the sight of him. The ruins were his only chance. But could he get there before them? They'd dropped their school bags somewhere. His one, full of books he'd borrowed from the library that day, was still on his arm.

He made it. Pulled himself up and jumped inside through a windowless frame on ground level. Headed straight for the stairs, up the stone steps with holes in them, across one room, then another, until he found a safe niche in one of the corridors. He crouched, panting and dripping with sweat. His heart rattled in his chest like a startled bird inside a cage. He was afraid. Absolutely bloody afraid. He clamped his hand over his mouth, so that they wouldn't hear his wheezing. After a moment, he relaxed and listened in.

There were voices downstairs. They'd split up again – to find him more quickly. He heard footsteps on the stairs, then the gravel and the rubbish crunching under their shoes. One of them was close, one further away, one upstairs, and one downstairs. None of them on his floor yet. He breathed deeply and started repeating a few lines of his mantra in his head – something he'd come up with the night he'd come home with a black eye. The words lifted him up, spurred him on to act, gave him courage. Because there was no situation without a solution.

Do not ask for mercy – for there is no God. Do not show weakness – or you will lose the respect of others…

He heard quiet footsteps on the stairs. One of the boys was approaching. He shut his eyes tight, collecting himself. He tightened his grip on the heavy, book-filled bag.

Only you can help yourself…

That's right, he had to do it himself. No matter how many of them there were. What mattered was determination, fortitude, cunning. The fact they outnumbered him was insignificant. After all, he was four times smarter. Maybe even sixteen.

Do not pay attention to others – no one is more important than you…

The footsteps in the corridor drew nearer. The bully was just a few metres away from his hideout. Ariel gathered himself.

Do not speak to strangers – they can only upset you…

He swung his bag when the boy was just a step away. It was Michał – the one with the nasty grin permanently glued to his face – a huge ass-kisser always laughing at ringleader Romek's jokes, no matter how objectively unfunny they were.

Michał took a hit in the face. He wobbled and crashed on his back with a groan, stirring up a cloud of dust. He was so stunned, he didn't even react. For a moment, he had no clue what had happened, then his hands flew to his nose, smashed and bleeding. No longer a hero with a zest for beating up the weak. He simply burst out crying now, trying to stop the bleeding. Ariel dashed forward and kicked him in the side.

Then, he headed straight for the sound of the next bully. He felt blissfully light. The fear had gone. Now *he* was the hunter.

'Do not ask for mercy – for there is no God,' he mouthed to himself. 'Do not show weakness – or you will lose the respect of others.'

He dropped his bag in the corridor and rushed downstairs.

'Only you can help yourself,' he repeated, the words giving him courage.

He caught the second boy in the corner of one of the rooms. He rained down a storm of punches and kicks on him, before he could even react. The bully fell to his knees, shielding his head with his arms. Still,

Ariel gave him two more kicks, then he vanished, as quickly as he'd appeared. He'd left the boy whimpering, spitting blood from his beat-up lips. It was Janusz, another one of Romek's lapdogs.

'Do not pay attention to others – no one is more important than you. Do not speak to strangers – they can only upset you.'

On the ground floor, he found them. Jarek was half-carrying Michał, who was still bleeding profusely from his nose. At the sight of Ariel, Jarek lost all will to fight, released his friend and simply bolted without a word. Michał, despite his sorry state, followed in his footsteps and also made a run for it. They weren't as tough as they'd previously thought.

'Only you can help yourself,' he said, louder this time. He scanned the floor and picked up a heavy broken half of a red brick.

'Where are you?!' Romek's voice came from upstairs. 'Got the little shit?!'

He was met with silence. He called out again, this time louder, his voice clearly tinged with worry.

'Michał, Jarek?! What's up? Where have you gone?!'

Ariel climbed the stairs, brick in hand. He crept silently, like a malevolent ghost, or at least quietly enough for Romek not to hear him. The leader of the pack was in the attic, ranting at his absent friends, more and more angry and impatient. Finally, he yanked the balcony doors, which were boarded up with fibreboard. The old nails inside the rotten doorframe gave way, and Romek walked out onto the balcony half-destroyed by time. Its barrier was ripped off on one side – it wasn't wise to go onto it. But Romek went regardless, avoiding that part of the balcony. He probably wanted to get a view of the area – maybe his friends had noticed Ariel fleeing and chased after him. Romek leaned very slightly over the plank barrier – years ago, someone had set it up for safety. It was unclear whose safety. After all, no one ever came up here.

‘Only you can help yourself.’

Romek was standing in a good spot. He couldn’t hear Ariel approaching. Until Ariel was standing at the threshold of the balcony door.

Romek spun around. There must have been something in Ariel’s demeanour, because his face filled in with fear. This was how underage school bullies operated. They lost all their self-assurance once their band of supporters was gone and they had to look the tormented person in the eye on their own. And special courage was needed if the victim was wielding a brick. Romek turned pale, unable to say a word. Good – nothing smart would’ve come out of his lips anyway. On the inside, he was an empty vessel. Nothing to offer the world other than damage and destruction. An expendable individual. It was his turn to be powder – while Ariel was turning to stone.

If there ever was a moment when a dormant beast woke inside a man, this was it.

‘Do not pay attention to others – no one is more important than you. Do not speak to strangers – they can only upset you,’ Ariel said, and he took a step towards Romek.

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Republic of Poland

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