

With a screech of the brakes and a violent jolt, the train came to a halt. Zofia stood up, pulled down the window, and the scorching breath of August entered the compartment. Outside, a field of sun-bleached rye undulated like a sea, one breaker chasing another towards the dark fringe of forest on the horizon. Had the train stopped in the middle of nowhere? Again?

‘Zimmmnnneee!’

She exhaled and felt her body relax. So, this was her stop after all. She reached for her satchel on the luggage rack and stepped into the corridor. Yanking the heavy carriage door open, she saw that Zimne had a station sign but no platform. Just a path of sand and weeds. She placed a foot on the first step and measured the distance to the ground. It was still almost a metre. She jumped, landing in a puff of dust. Her sandals, her best and only summer shoes, were no longer white.

As she slipped them off and began brushing at them with her white handkerchief, she noticed that another passenger had also disembarked.

With a whistle, a jerk, and a hiss of the brakes, the train moved again, its heavy, metal carcass trundling away just above their heads, leaving a trail of oily sweat on the rails. When the last carriage dissolved into the distance, Zimne was once more a few metres of sandy path and a wooden sign in a sea of rye.

The man was watching her. ‘Where are you heading?’ he called out.

She paused. Sweeping her hair back from her face, she studied him, noticing the easy smile. The war had taught her not to trust appearances. Yet there were no signposts or houses, nothing to orient her. ‘Rzepniki,’ she called back.

‘That way. Eight kilometres.’ He pointed north where the road disappeared into the rye.