



VINTAGE

THE STARS CAN WAIT

JAY BASU

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About the Book

It is the autumn of 1940, one year into the German occupation of Poland. In a small mining village in Upper Silesia, Gracian Sofka is fifteen years old. The past year he has been risking his skin, making expeditions into the forest after curfew to gaze at the stars.

By the time six months have passed, Gracian will have journeyed twice more into the forest, the German army will be on the French Atlantic coast, the constellations will have followed their secret paths across the universe, and Paweł, Gracian's beloved elder brother, will be dead.

About the Author

Jay Basu was born in London and still lives there. He attended Cambridge University, graduated in 1999, and has since been teaching and writing fiction. *The Stars Can Wait* is his first novel.

*To Ann, Dipak, and Laura Basu,
to my darling T.K.,
to Becky Strzeja,
and to Paul Strzeja, without whose story
this one could never have been written.*

THE STARS CAN WAIT

Jay Basu

VINTAGE BOOKS
London

The incense was to heaven dear,
Not as a perfume, but a tear.
And stars show lovely in the night,
But as they seem the tears of light.

Andrew Marvell, 'Eyes and Tears'

Author's Note

The village of Maleńkowice does not exist and has never existed; its surroundings and its likenesses, however, are real. The region of Central Europe known as Silesia, settled in the Middle Ages by Germans and Poles, belonged variously to the Kingdom of Poland, Bohemia, the Austrian Habsburgs and Prussia. In 1918, as Polish independence came into existence, the Polish-speaking populace of Upper Silesia, east of the Oder river, expressed their desire to become part of Poland proper. After three Polish uprisings and a plebiscite, the region was divided chiefly between Poland and Germany, with Poland acquiring barely one-seventh of the original landmass of all Silesia. On this small slip of earth, our story unfolds.

ONE

ON AN AUTUMN night in 1940, one year into German occupation, in a Polish mining village called Maleńkowice within the area known as Upper Silesia, a fifteen-year-old boy named Gracian Sówka sat poised and upright on his bed watching his sleeping brother. He breathed carefully and with respect for the silence, each breath composing itself into a white cloud blooming and then fading into the cold air. His brother, Paweł, twelve years his elder, whispered in his sleep, a single long strip of moonlight tracing over his cheek and pillow. When Gracian was sure that sleep was absolute, he swung his legs slowly round and let his feet rest upon the floorboards. He reached down, hands fumbling in the dark, and pulled on his woollen trousers and a heavy jumper over his nightshirt and then his shoes, pausing now and again to let the low creaks of the mattress resolve themselves into silence. Then he stood and walked to the door, unhung his coat, and hunched it on. He patted the pocket to feel the bulk of its special cargo, waited with one hand on the rim of the open door for nothing, for the right time perhaps, and then slipped out.

On the landing he walked too noisily past the room in which his mother slept. At the end of the hall was a window. The moonlight painted pale oblongs on the dirty wood. Downstairs slept his older sister and her husband and their baby and some of the animals who were locked into the kitchen out of the cold. He reached the window. He undid the catch and eased the lower frame up as far as he needed. The wood was old and tiny white flakes tumbled down on to his hands. A gap had opened in the night and his heart was already beating through it.

He climbed out with an ease that was practised, turned himself around on the ledge and knelt and gripped the wood; then he lowered himself slowly down until he was

hanging by his fingers flat against the wall of the house. The night was black and faultless and a chill breeze pricked at his skin. He reached out with one hand towards the crab-apple tree that grew in the yard and felt the rough cold bark of the nearest limb and held it tight. He gave a slight kick against the wall and then swung his other arm through space and clamped that hand around the branch and he was free, the whole canopy shifting with his weight and the red leaves rustling, cascading, a crimson snow melting into the shadows below. He edged down the branch until he reached the trunk and let himself fall and thud on to solid ground.

Then he ran. He ran through the darkened yard, vaulting the wall there, and across the rise of field beyond, his shadow arcing up to catch him in the moonlight, his breath alive and white, up towards the forest edge. There were no patrols in the field, but once he reached the forest he needed to be careful.

The darkness of the forest was like no other and the silence was not that of death but of the watching of things. The boy knew his way and moved as if following a path or thread of shadow visible only to himself. He weaved through trees and thickets, listening to the scuffling of his feet and the rasp of his breathing, tripping through blackness towards his goal. From somewhere further within the many kilometres of forest, further than he had dared to venture, came a brief ticklish rumble, and he knew that German vehicles were out there moving around the small outhouses of the army base.

Less than halfway there, he heard the sound of voices and of feet less careful than his own. And after that came a sudden sweep of flashlight against the trees, becoming two distinct haloes quivering and breaking and rebreaking and the voices coming nearer speaking German to each other in

hushed bursts. Gracian moved himself behind a thick pine and let the night consume him. The two men came nearer, their flashlights probing. In the dark the boy's chest heaved and his throat burned and the muscles in his legs were wire tight. The men were very close, their footsteps seeming to sound inside his head, and the lights were leaping and idling around the closest trees and picking out the furrowed bark and then they reached the place where the boy waited. He closed his eyes. He could hear the men pausing, muttering about the cold, and could feel the light curling, extending around the heavy trunk, trying to reach his face and tear it from the darkness.

The light was gone and the men were leaving. The boy waited and craned his head around the trunk. Two men. Olive coats and black holsters. The patrol.

Again he was running. Deep into the forest to the viewing-place, the place he had been coming to since he was twelve years old. A tiny clearing only a few metres square, where the trees rose on all sides to frame the sky in an unbroken circle as if to offer it to the earth below. When the boy reached it he threw himself down upon his back among the thick bracken and spike-grass and regained his breath and let the air cool his sweat. Then he took his first real look at the sky. No clouds. A pure and boundless nothing, pinned through with one hundred billion stars. The universe gathered between treetops.

He lay there and gazed up for a long while. Then he reached into his coat pocket and pulled out the bronze-gilt magnifying glass his father had used for reading in the last months of the disease and weighed it in his hand. He reached back in and removed the pocketbook and read again its title, eyes straining in the dim reflected starlight. *Wstęp Do Astronomii*, faded red letters on cream. He turned

to his favourite pages, ignoring the words, and inspected the pictures there. Constellations, eighty-eight of them. Their names below – names wild and restless in a language that was not his own.

The River, The Furnace, The Hunting Dogs; *Eridanus, Fornax, Canes Venatici*. The Lion, The Wolf, The Southern Cross; *Leo, Lupus, Crux*.

Propping the book next to his head, he lay back down and raised the magnifier before his eyes until the ring of sky had slid behind the lens, bulging out towards him. He watched the stars swell and settle as the glass swept over them and he looked there for the printed shapes upon the page.

In the east, the Great Bear. In the west, the Crab. He traced their shapes with his eyes, like reading.

After a while, he put down the glass and huddled in his coat for warmth and watched the sky unaided. He would have to leave soon, he knew, but the dreaminess had him and he imagined himself rising up into the expanse until he was nothing but another pinprick dancing above the world. Then a meteor shower on the northern rim of the trees sent out five or six trails reaching out and dying back, as if a golden hand had risen through the distance and tried to grasp hold of the night, and Gracian was lost completely to the wonder.

By the time he heard the footfalls it was too late. He felt two hands grip him roughly by his coat-collar and he tried to gasp, but one of the hands had clamped his mouth shut. A man's face was upside-down over his, blocking the sky.

'You idiot.'

Paweł. It was his brother Paweł hauling him up with his good hand to face him. His bad hand was around Gracian's neck.

‘What do you think you’re doing out here after curfew?’ he was saying in a low voice, his expression violent. ‘Lying on the ground like a madman! Don’t you know they’ll kill you if they find you? The forest is crawling with patrols tonight, you stupid boy, *Ty idioto!*’

Paweł snatched the magnifier from his brother’s hand. When Gracian could speak he said,

‘But what are you – but you were *sleeping* –’

‘You are a madman, do you know that?’ Paweł said, dragging his brother up until they were both squatting. ‘Now be quiet and follow me. And *stay close.*’

Then Paweł led his brother through the forest a way he had never travelled before until they were back at the house and the sun was lapping at the distant forest edge and the blackness was becoming candlelight orange. Tomorrow Gracian had to work an afternoon shift at Colliery Richter, known formerly as Colliery Siemianowice.

Before they climbed back through the window Gracian turned to his brother.

‘Please don’t tell Mother,’ he whispered.

Paweł placed his hands on his brother’s shoulders.

‘I won’t. This time. And you should be grateful for it until the day you die,’ he said. Then he shook his head and looked hard at Gracian. ‘But this madness has to stop, understand?’ he said. ‘This is the last time, I’ll make sure of it, This hobby of yours is not worth your life, or Mother’s happiness. The stars can wait, boy – that’s all they ever do.’

Gracian remained silent. Then he said, ‘How did you find me, Paweł?’

His brother did not smile. He simply made a trough with his hands for Gracian to stand upon and told him to hurry before the sun was full.

An hour later the cockerels began to sing.

It was the autumn of 1940.

In a small mining village in Upper Silesia.

Gracian Sófka was fifteen years old.