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a novel

THIS IS  
HOW IT  
BEGINS

JOAN DEMPSEY

U.S. \$16.95 | Fiction

**WINNER OF THE 2017 MAUREEN EGEN WRITERS  
EXCHANGE AWARD FROM *POETS & WRITERS***

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**I**N 2009, eighty-five-year-old art professor Ludka Zeilonka gets drawn into a political firestorm when her grandson, Tommy, is among a group of gay Massachusetts teachers fired for allegedly silencing Christian kids in high school classrooms. The ensuing battle to reinstate the teachers raises the specter of Ludka's World War II past—a past she's spent a lifetime trying to forget.

Radio host Warren Meck has been leading the Massachusetts campaign to root out anti-religious bias in public schools—but he believes in working respectfully within the political system, so he's alarmed and offended when his efforts are undermined by someone inciting violent action. Even worse, he fears the culprit is among his inner circle.

Compulsively readable, *This Is How It Begins* is a timely novel about free speech, the importance of empathy, and the bitter consequences of long-buried secrets.

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“In a time when religious liberty is on trial,  
[this] is an extraordinarily pertinent novel dripping in suspense  
and powerful scenes of political discourse ... a must-read ....”

— *FOREWORD MAGAZINE*, starred review

“... Dempsey's fine first novel [is] notable for the  
evenhanded way it addresses hot-button issues. The result  
is a timely and memorable story.”

—*BOOKLIST*

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## Praise for *This Is How It Begins*

WINNER OF THE 2017 MAUREEN EGEN WRITERS EXCHANGE  
AWARD FROM POETS AND WRITERS

“A gripping and sensitive portrait of ordinary people wrestling with ideological passions.”

—KIRKUS

“In this remarkable novel, Joan Dempsey brings together contemporary America and Holocaust-era Warsaw to tell a riveting tale of family secrets, civil rights, and the persistence of memory. Here are pastors and politicians, teachers and activists, historians and spies—all of them, on every side of the cultural divide, imbued with genuine humanity. *This Is How It Begins* is an essential story for our time.”

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“Joan Dempsey’s debut novel explores the limits of empathy and the unpredictability of violence. Thoughtful people who reach opposing conclusions are at the all-too-human center of *This Is How It Begins*, a prescient road map for our times.”

—Mary Rechner, Author of  
*Nine Simple Patterns for Complicated Women*”

“Joan Dempsey’s spellbinding novel illuminates how the tides of history repeat themselves with different characters. When a group is targeted for discrimination there will be resisters and rescuers, but mostly bystanders. *This is How It Begins* superbly demonstrates the clandestine nature of rescue, and the irony that those who ought to be rewarded for their conscience and courage remain hidden, and live in fear. Reading this moving adventure compels us to bear witness to the past and present and think about our own complacency to everyday discrimination in our midst.”

—Eva Fogelman, Ph.D., Author of the Pulitzer Prize nominee  
*Conscience and Courage: Rescuers of Jews During the Holocaust*

“Dempsey brings her characters to life with equal parts empathy and tough-mindedness, from the three generations of the Zeilonka family—refugees, artists, politicians, teachers—to the pastor and radio host striving together to remake the United States into a Christian nation. A riveting story of the clash between LGBT and fundamentalist Christian cultures, and the way its violence reawakens historical trauma, this striking debut is essential reading for our times.”

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“This exquisitely drawn and timely novel will remind you why we have freedom of expression, ideas, sexuality and religion, and leave you wondering why we’re so quick to forget the lessons of the past.”

—Paddy Murphy, *Material Pictures*

# THIS IS HOW IT BEGINS

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This Is How It Begins

# This Is How It Begins

A Novel

Joan Dempsey



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Published 2017

Printed in the United States of America

ISBN: 978-1-63152-308-3 pbk

ISBN: 978-1-63152-309-0 ebk

Library of Congress Control Number: 2017939857

For information, address:

She Writes Press

1563 Solano Ave #546

Berkeley, CA 94707

She Writes Press is a division of SparkPoint Studio, LLC.

**Washed By The Water**

Words and Music by Nathaniel “Bo” Rinehart and William “Bear” Rinehart

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*For Bert*

*It's long been a point of mine that the freedom of religion, which this country alleges to support, works two ways. We're not only free to practice the religion of our choice, we should be free from having someone else's religion practiced on us.*

—John Irving, *Keene Sentinel*, March 26, 2007

*If we take the capsulation of minorities within the nation-state as a given condition, the implication of the Holocaust is that the life and liberties of minorities depend primarily upon whether the dominant group includes them within its universe of obligation; these are the bonds that hold or the bonds that break.*

—Helen Fein, *Accounting for Genocide*

*Danny would have thought it comical if it had come from any other source, on any other day, in any other country. But Curtis had come to the table with something they'd never expected, something they would have thought outmoded and outlived in the modern age: a kind of fundamental righteousness that only the fundamental possessed. Unfettered by doubt, it achieved the appearance of moral intelligence and a resolute consciousness. The terrible thing was how small it made you feel, how weaponless. How could you fight righteous rage if the only arms you bore were logic and sanity?*

—Dennis Lehane, *The Given Day*

# Part I

# 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, Izaak, were optimistically calling her reveries. The first time she’d had one, sitting in the garden at home last summer, Izaak 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. Izaak 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 other-worldly 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.

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