



A Spell of Bad Weather

By all accounts, the day promised nothing good. According to the weathermen, a cold front was advancing rapidly from the Russian steppes. Astrologers said the stars were misaligned. City planners knew that the metropolis would come to a standstill today. They furrowed their brows, shrugged their shoulders, drank strong coffee, stared at their computer screens and did nothing. By 8.30 am the road and tram junction at Wileński was already jammed with impatient traffic, roaring engines, agitated horns, steamed windows, wailing ambulances and police cars inching their way through to attend a multitude of minor incidents. Long lines of people, umbrellas fighting with the wind, peered down the tracks into the gloom, anxiously awaiting the appearance of the next over-packed tram, contents crushed and perspiring. Quicker to walk today, despite the piercing rain, better to walk than stand still and shiver.

The crowds waiting at the lights wait and wait, like the frozen statues of the sleeping soldiers above them. The lines of traffic remain immobile but no-one will cross the wide street without the permission of the green flickering figure, who refuses to come to life and stays on red for a very long time. The waiters wait and wait and miss the next tram and the one after that and send texts to the person waiting elsewhere for them. 'Please another 15 minutes. Maybe. Sorry.' An old man, bent over and oblivious to the unchanging state of the traffic lights, retrieves a broken umbrella from a rubbish bin. He turns it carefully over and over in his bare hands, thinking how he might repair it.

Construction work was deconstructing the city. The buses, once reliable, became later and later. Despite their unpredictability, still passengers obsessively consulted the timetables. The new Mayor had promised to fix everything but it seemed everything needed fixing at once and she had set about it with the all the gusto and energy of a zealot. Consequently, bridges, roads, buildings, parks, pavements, tram lines were all were dug up and rearranged. But nothing was finished and winter was nearly upon the tumultuous city. The inhabitants muttered to themselves that it looked more like a combat zone than the commercial heart of the nation. Even the honour guard, marching smartly towards the gates of the Presidential Palace, looked more like startled rabbits than a disciplined military formation. Their practiced and smooth choreography was disturbed by the broken lines of the pavement and shifting heaps of gravel. They looked at each other in panic as they regularly broke step and stumbled along unsteadily due to the appearance of some new hole or even the disappearance of the Palace gates - removed without their knowledge for painting and regilding. Or perhaps stolen, thought one soldier. Who could tell, amidst the chaos?

Only those commuters who stood for a moment in the shadow of the Orthodox basicala felt any sense of peace this morning, as they looked up at the domes and imagined faint choral harmonies drifting somewhere behind the gusts of wind and rain. On the other side of the building, children and parents left their apartment blocks and made their way to school through the park, the fallen leaves in sodden piles all around, colour fading like the memory of the impossibly warm autumn equinox just a few days before. One girl, delaying her arrival in the classroom for as long as possible, claps her hands in delight at a red squirrel - who ignores her and scampers about in the constant search for food.

Her Mother calls to her, 'Hurry, hurry, Agnieszka!' Rushing her daughter out of the door on this dreadful morning, she has forgotten her own gloves and her hands are getting very cold. 'Come along now, we'll miss the bears if we don't hurry,' she says, knowing this is a lie. The bears will not be strolling about their enclosure by the side of the road this morning. She also knows that when finally they walk by the zoo and no bears will be seen, her daughter - looking in vain - will ask with an angry look on her face, 'Mama, where are they?' And her Mother will have to tell her: 'Hmm, they must be inside their bear house, wrapped in soft blankets, tucked up warm in bed, asleep for the winter. No room for Goldilocks on this horrible morning.' She doesn't really know if the bears

hibernate for the winter or not; she resolves to find out the facts of the matter.

While she impatiently waits for her daughter to stop chasing small animals, she notices that all of the park bins have freshly installed plastic bags and, already, many smouldering cigarette ends are deposited in them. Later, when full and reclaimed by the park attendants, she imagines they will surely split open and abruptly expel their damp contents all over the pavement. She is thankful she does not have this job to do.

The smokers, taking a short cut through the park to the bridge, do not want to notice anything, heads down under umbrellas and hoods and hats. There is one man, unshaven and dishevelled, who is in no hurry to go anywhere. He staggers from behind a tree where he has spent the night. He holds out his hands in supplication and asks politely for money. 'Small change please...' The smokers ignore him. They hurry on, past the red inflatable hand with a smiley face which advertises the joys of mobile telephones – it swings forlornly back and forth like a broken scarecrow.

Walking briskly along Jagiellonska, breathing in the unpleasant exhaust fumes of motionless vehicles, Jacek pretends that he does not have another full day of painting walls ahead. He too has forgotten his gloves, waking late, missing his alarm and breakfast, and his fingertips are numb already. He is unshaven and untidier than usual and in a deeply resentful mood. He is tired of this side of town with its hustle and bustle and dark reputation. He dreams of moving to Żoliborz, where life is calmer. Next year, he tells himself, next year, it will be really something to look forward to, and maybe even his girlfriend will move in with him.

A nun, entirely weatherproof, waits to cross the road, having left her morning devotions at the Loreto Chapel. She is wondering why the fresh-cut flowers of yesterday, placed tenderly at the feet of the statue of the Virgin Mary, have already withered. She has a look of puzzlement - or perhaps awe - on her face. The ways of the Lord are indeed mysterious, she thinks. She watches, as no-one else does, the leaves of the chestnut and maple trees fluttering down and the rain falling like the tears of Christ shed for these unrepenting sinners.

The street hawkers lay out their wares in the busy subway under Targowa Street near to the indoor shopping mall. Flanked by two fragrant flower stalls, they go about their business, glad to be below ground today. There are flying birds for sale, whose constant whirr irritates the ears of the passer-bys, and pegs, belts, shoelaces, make-up, doughnuts, apples, lace curtains, knitwear, cds, dvds. A man holds out a single saucepan to sell. Another has six paperback novels by Charles Bukowski laid out on a

blanket, three in English language. Marek's feet trudge slowly past these cramped and competing stalls and goods he can see no purpose in purchasing. His rucksack feels especially heavy this morning. Above the rumble of the trams he can still hear sirens wailing mournfully. He has a hangover and he pictures the globe spinning out of control and himself clinging on for dear life. Dressed as usual in designer black, he thinks that his saturnine appearance will fully blend in with the foul day ahead.

Dorota uses her bicycle to cross from the east bank to the Old Town. Despite the exercise, which she welcomes, her knees are starting to ache in the cold. She wonders if it was a mistake to use her bike on such an unpromising morning as this and how late she will be for her meeting at the university. She looks forward to the crisp spring days, and how she will then enjoy the ride across the the bridge, the expanse of water below – for her, the fulcrum of the city – and at dusk, as she returns, the lights of the bridges downstream glittering like jewels.

The river is high, swollen, unmoving. The arteries of the city, already clogged, natural or man-made, are sluggish. There are no fishermen making their way through the woods down to the shore today. The fish stay in the deep, unmolested. The rain will trickle constantly, becoming more like ice than rain. The roads soon flood, the waters seeping into the subways. Holes in the pavement become small lakes. The workmen repairing the crumbling stones of the tram platform at Hallera curse silently as the nun passes and not so silently once she has gone. Everything they have restored in recent days seems to be coming apart again. Their boots are leaking and waterlogged. They cross the road, back and forth, ignoring the stop light, weaving in and out of the traffic, to change socks, coats and tools, like a procession of the condemned. Eventually, they dig a huge hole and uncover the culprit, an ancient metal pump whose seams have cracked apart. The city's clean water is draining away in this one soggy spot, an inland sea is slowly forming. They call for a large crane to remove the rusting hulk, which will take several hours to arrive and the local water supply needs to be cut off. In the meantime they decide to improve access for the crane and cut back the tree branches. No climbing ropes, chainsaws or tree surgeons required. Would any come today? Unlikely! A ladder, an axe and a bad temper will suffice.

Marek takes the tram across the river, a short but unpleasant journey for him this morning. He alights at the first stop, dizzy from his sardine-can experience. The tram disappears into the tunnel cut under the Old Town, rumbling ominously past the traffic backed up all the way from Rondo Kercelak. He takes the steps up to the main square. He

notices the deep impressions left in the concrete by some aberrant boot – a footprint every two steps, descending. He wonders why he has never noticed these before, though now they are quite clearly defined, filled with dirty water. Who made these marks? Did they do it deliberately? Were they drunk? Why do there seem to be more prints of the left foot than the right? He shook his head - impossible questions and perhaps pointless.

He has reached the summit now, a little breathless. As he continues along Krakowskie Przedmieście he thinks about the Estonian feature he saw last week at the Film Festival. It asked the question: is life worth living? The Estonian answer: it is not. Today, in the miserable grey light, he can empathise with this view. A woman in the next row seemed to sleep through the entire movie. Arriving after the beginning of the film, a little flustered, she immediately took out a notebook and started scribbling but within ten minutes she had fallen asleep. He envied her foresight. He had seen her several times before, at documentary shorts, Japanese horror and a recent Peter Greenway film. Flame red hair that was hard to forget. He wondered if she was a student of film or, more likely, some kind of critic. He considered asking her when he shook her awake at the end.

‘It’s over,’ he said gently.

‘What happened?’ she asked.

‘He died,’ he answered.

‘Ah, life is not beautiful,’ she said.

This was the unfortunate thought he took with him into his business meeting. The meeting went poorly. The less said about it the better. His powerpoint presentation – to a publishing house wanting to promote a group of young writers called The New Neurotics – was far too long. Their attention wavered. His jokes fell flat. His potential clients were gruff and uncooperative. They did not like his copywriting, or concept, or approach. His CV, littered with few awards, failed to impress. It seemed they didn’t like anything. Their mood was as black as the weather outside. On his way out, one of the executives said to him, ‘Life is brutal, my arse!’

After this excruciating experience, he desperately wanted to stand at the counter of his favourite Bistro near Hotel Bristol, drink vodka and beer in total anonymity, but he was at the wrong end of town. The dull skies opened again, a downpour of arctic ferocity, sending the temperatures plummeting. He quickened his pace and ducked into the nearest doorway, entering a bookstore he had never been into before. He avoided the marketing section and for a while browsed the contemporary

fiction shelves. There was a new book by the most dangerous poet in Warsaw. It didn't seem so exciting to him.

The store quickly became congested with crowds escaping the rain, and he moved further back, to the history and art section. He pulled a picture book from the shelf. It revealed to him the glorious heritage of Krakow. He stood in the corner and aimlessly flicked through the colour plates - the Cloth Hall, the mime artists, the Dragon, Wawel Hill, the former Jewish quarter, the famous Pope's window. He looked up from the book. In front of him was a large table with an elaborate display of art books and a curious thing - a large cat, black and white, but mostly white, stretched out like the portrait of the Rokeby Venus. It rolled over lazily, pulling itself upright. It had a patch of black fur on either side of its body and on each side of its head, as if somebody had deliberately splashed black paint onto a pristine white canvas, stepped back to admire the effect and then dipped the whole of the cat's tail into the paint with a final flourish.

The glossy black tail flicked back and forth as the cat walked around the table, carefully picking its way over and between the books. It avoided the book with Marat dead in his bath on the cover, and editions featuring Van Eyck and Velazquez. It paused to admire the rich tresses and velvet gowns of Rossetti women and seemed to enjoy brushing up against anything by Klimt.

The cat magnetically drew customers, who were all too keen to stroke it and admire its markings and fine fur. The cat, quite imperious, ignored all their advances. If anyone attempted greater intimacy, dared to stroke it more than once, it shrunk away, leaping down to the floor and circling like a hungry wolf. After a while, the cat climbed back up to resume its former position, with another leisurely stretch, giving a baleful look of warning to the next person who might dare to approach. Shrugging off the compliments lavished upon it, it lay down again on top of a huge volume of Fra Angelico and yawned.

Marek watched as the cat suddenly stirred, quite alert. Its head craned to one side, inquisitive, eyes scanning the crowd. He realised it was watching one particular person who had walked into the shop - a young woman about his age. Black hair, red hat, face almost hidden in a huge scarf, dripping wet. She was speaking into her mobile phone.

'Friday night is not possible. I have to collect a ticket from the Krakow train. I have to go to the Palace of Culture and get a video of tango. Don't ask why. Oh, that's Saturday not Friday. I forget which...'

It did not make much sense to him – some kind of riddle? - but the way the cat was paying attention suggested it perhaps had some special insight. The cat purred as the young woman walked over to the art book table and absent-mindedly scratched it behind the ear. It did not leap away, continuing to purr contentedly, as if saying ‘More please.’

The young woman finished the call and walked over to a bookshelf. The cat jumped down and followed. She put down her bag and studied the books. The cat climbed into her bag and also began browsing. She picked a book and walked back and forth, ignoring the cat’s explorations. He saw it was an illustrated copy of Alice in Wonderland.

Alice, Alice, too big, too small, too inquisitive, he thought. As he did, he caught her eye and she smiled a faint smile, as if somehow aware of his private thought. His heart skipped a beat. She looked straight at him, more than a little cat like he thought.

‘You are staring at me like a dangerous poet,’ she said. And it was true that he was staring at her, quite dumbstruck, but he could not recall what the photograph of the dangerous poet on the book jacket actually looked like or whether he bore any resemblance. With embarrassment, he felt his face turning as red as her hat.

‘I’m very sorry,’ he said in a stuttering voice that didn’t sound like his at all. ‘I was staring at the cat as well.’

She looked at the book in his hand and said, ‘If you had a more interesting book you would not have to stare.’ She smiled again and he felt so much better. Quite unexpectedly, he found himself grinning. He thought the cat was smiling too. He felt like a small child carrying a large birthday cake with all the candles lit. So warm in here, he thought. How he glowed!

Now, while some people believe in fairy princesses, feng shui, guardian angels, griffins, various talismans, lucky charms or muses, Marek did not particularly believe in anything other than the power of the marketplace. But here he was exposed to something quite elemental, the magic power of a particular smile. It was not the enigmatic smile of the Mona Lisa. This smile was irrepressible, rapturous and more than a little charismatic. It radiated waves of joy that turned the corners of your mouth from downwards to upwards. Was it perhaps unique in this city of two million? He desperately wanted a photograph of this smile. He imagined it reproduced and adorning thousands of walls like the iconic image of Che Guevara, or even Gary Cooper in High Noon. Forget the face of Lancôme or L’Oreal, this was more enchanting, more beguiling. His head

was spinning, but in his heart he knew that whatever possessed him in this moment could not be bottled or manufactured or branded.

The possessor of the smile was not entirely aware of this talent. She knew that if she smiled at cats they were generally responsive. She occasionally thought: I am able to smile and make other people smile back at me. But she also thought: I can speak Russian without knowing Russian. (Some considered this not to be a special talent, more a necessity of life.) She felt so young and vibrant, with so many potential talents at her fingertips. Playing trumpet or an accordion, singing old Balkan songs, dancing crazily, making good soup. All these things were possible or desirable. In this vast vista of ability, nascent or realised, the power of her smile was not as obvious to her as it was to others. Her smile sometimes failed with the occupants of the bus from Otwock or Ursiek, when arriving at La Palma, disgorging several passengers who appeared to be in an advanced state of grief or possibly comatose. Maybe I'm laughing too much with my smile, she thought to herself on these few occasions, maybe they think I'm laughing at them, these gloomy people.

Nevertheless, for Marek the smile had a remarkable power, healing the rift in this particular part of the universe today. He felt like singing. He pictured himself running out into the street and dancing like Gene Kelly. Already, he found he was mumbling 'Doo-dloo-doo-doo-doo, Doo-dloo-doo-doo-doo-doo-doo.' This was a ravishing smile that could power a factory throughout a five year plan - when they had such things, he thought ruefully.

'Sod the New Neurotics!' he announced, with an unexpected firmness. People turned to look at him. He really was in quite a daze, impossibly euphoric, floating on a flying carpet of green silk and legend fabricated by the painter Viktor Vasnetsov, above an ocean of happiness and the stars above were themselves smiling in the twilight. When he finally came to his senses again, he found she was gone. The Krakow book, with the Pope's window, was also gone. In his hand he now held Alice in Wonderland, which he quickly took to the counter and purchased.

Everyone around him in the bookstore had a contented dreamy look on their face. He walked out into the street, which was filling up with people again. The rain had stopped, the day seemed a little less drab. She was nowhere to be seen, but he thought a trace of her smile could be detected. As far as he could see, people looked unusually cheerful and even jolly, not in any haste, breathing the air deeply as if it tasted of something quite delightful. This was a blow to his normal rational self, the one that usually inhabited the concrete world of Cartesian logic, of

balance sheets and regulated behaviour. Was the day distinctly warmer? As he walked along, he found himself admiring the graffiti his fastidious and tidy mind usually despised. The cracks in the pavement appeared to be smaller, the leaves on the trees appeared to be in a state of renewal, none falling. Could it even be, he asked himself, that some had returned from the ground to the branches?

He went into a coffee house to calm his excitement. Instead of his usual green tea he ordered a double Espresso Macchiato with a smile he couldn't stop if he wanted to. The girl behind the counter smiled back, a genuine smile of pleasure. The soundsystem was playing a old pop song by The Cure, 'Friday, I'm in Love' - an irrepressible burst of energy condensed into three minutes and thirty six seconds. He found himself humming along with it. Life was not so brutal after all, he thought. His smile widened and it grew and grew, soon to be larger than that of any Cheshire Cat.