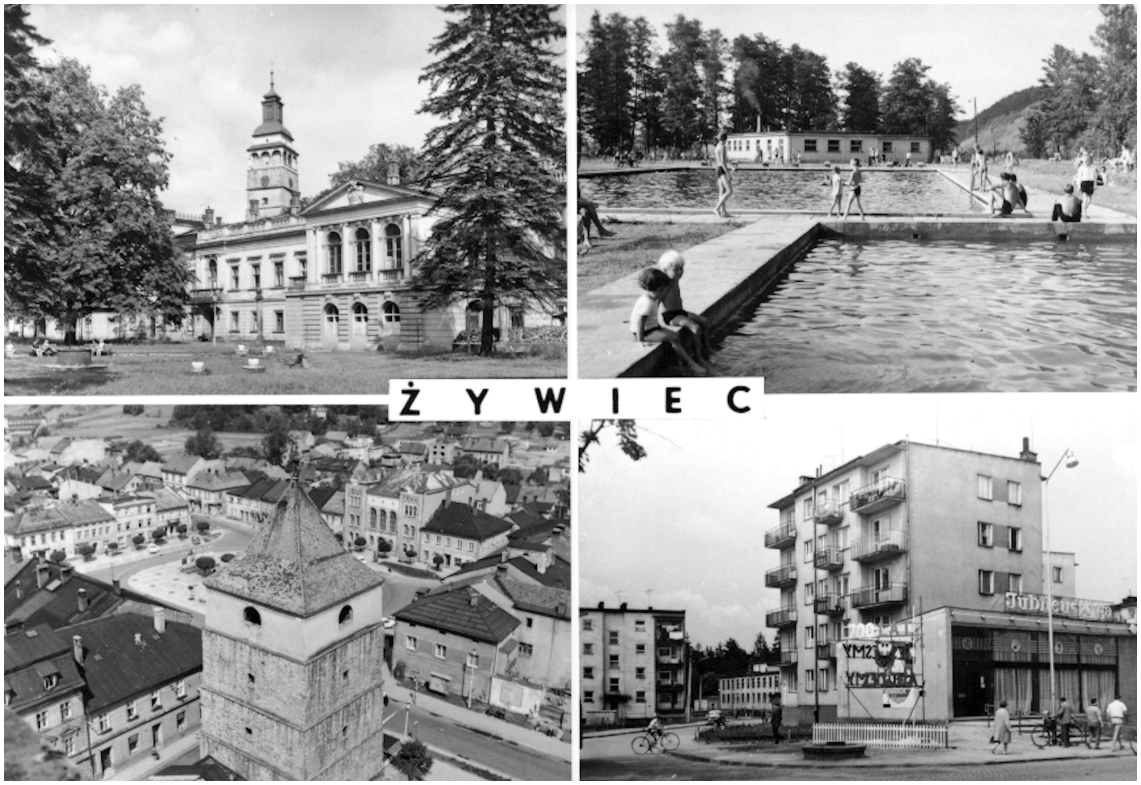
The Vodka Project

Brendan Jackson

WINTER


Ż Y W I E C

One night in Wolverhampton

Ł– first poured me a stiff drink, then went to rummage in the sideboard. He took out a chocolate box, all ebony gloss with a bouquet of roses embossed on the top. I recognise the brand, Black Magic, a courtship gift, popular as ever on Valentine's Day, and certainly the kind you would give your wife or partner to mark some celebratory occasion. It once held a selection of caramels, hazelnuts, cherries, marzipans and fruit creams, each coated in dark chocolate. Now in this cardboard box he stores photographs, mementoes of his past, each with their own story were this night long enough to tell them all. He shuffles them on the table, a kind of collage of memory.

In these he can often be seen larking about; in Toronto dancing with a street musician – a bagpipe player – that's just a few years ago, or he's clad head to foot in a Góralka highlander costume in Zakopane at the foot of the Tatra Mountains. The 1970s. Wide grins. He is pictured raising a toast to friends and family in their living room at Christmas, sometime in the early 1960s, his wavy hair brilliantine black. There's a lot of booze on the table in front of the television, BBC sports commentator David Coleman captured on screen behind them, in their hands small cut glasses of the kind my Mother would use to serve Cointreau or a fine Madeira sherry. Or it's a bright bank holiday afternoon on the promenade at Margate, their favourite holiday destination, where you can take a day trip to France, he and his wife captured in mid stride, skin brown as leather, courtesy of Sunbeam Photo Ltd (established 1919, by 1939 they employed 50 beach photographers), reorder price 6 ½ inch by 4 ½ inch 4 shillings each. Both hold a quizzical look on their face as they just notice the photographer pressing the shutter. This 'walking photograph' is kept mounted in is original paper wallet, on the cover a line drawing of a yacht, heeling to one side, with a happy couple

leaning back over the waves, seagulls above their heads. Later, he is pictured in the 1980s, outside his semi-detached maisonette, building a snowman with the neighbour's children, laughing, his hair now white as the piled snow. And here he can be seen at the recent Katyn Memorial parade, dressed in a formal naval blue jacket crossed with a red and white sash, with various service medals and decorations, amongst the annual gathering in the pine and birch forest of Cannock Chase, to remember the murdered, some 1,600 miles away from Smolensk Oblast.

With four compatriots he is pictured on the Riva Promenade in Split, standing in front of palm trees, and then all sitting in a line on the harbour wall. Monochrome. He is smoking a cigar, an inscrutable look on his face, the only one not wearing a tie. It could be a casual snap on vacation, but the date inscribed on the back of the picture tells us different, those early months of 1940 when all is uncertain, as they await hopeful of passage to Marseilles. Two years later, somewhere in Scotland he poses confidently for the camera in Mr and Mrs Butcher's back garden, this full length photograph showing him dressed smartly in a tweed kilt and jacket with matching waistcoat, a full dress sporran, chequered kilt socks and brogues, a hint of a smile. A handsome fellow.

Ah, he says, *for Saturday teatime at their home they dressed me in that uniform and tried to teach me how to play golf. I didn't learn much. I should have learned the golf, I would have been all right today if I had played golf.*

Then, printed on a stiffer card, a formal studio portrait from 1946, sepia tinted, in dress uniform, looking straight at the camera, his body turned slightly to one side, on his left arm the patch of the Polish 1st Armoured Division prominent. This portrait was taken around the same time that the former Reichsminister of Foreign Affairs, Von Ribbentrop, who had done so much to determine the fate of

Poland in 1939, complained of having a hard time being grilled at Nuremberg by the British prosecutor, retiring to his cell at night to break down in a fit of hysterical weeping.

As Ł– approaches his eighty second birthday, tall and dapper, always well dressed, always with a smile on his face, he seems a happy and contented man, though I know he is alone now. He has outlived so many of his contemporaries. His wife passed some years back and had suffered with dementia.

I would never wish that on anybody – it's terrible. If you are disabled, your brain still works – you can communicate to other people. But these people cannot communicate. You have got to look after them like you would a little baby. You have to carry them and you have to understand them and you have to keep with what they want. You cannot upset these people. They do not know anything. She knew a lot of people but she could not remember anybody, not even her own sister or niece. They don't remember. But it's all right, people die and we move on and I forget it and that's it.

He doesn't forget though, his own store of memories opens up this night. He is full of stories. In the chocolate box, alongside these past moments, dozens of postcards from his travels, collected over the decades, in monochrome and then Technicolor. Some he has sent to himself. From Kraków, Warsaw, Węgierska Górka, Kuźnice, Wisła, Żywiec, Gdansk, **Żywiec**, Jeleśnia, Milówka, Bytom, various glorious peaks of the Tatras, street scenes of Lwów, and Volary in the Czech Republic. Crossing the new European borders with relative impunity, holding a British passport. It was less difficult those days, as the 1970s turned to the 1980s and he relished his freedom. There are the dense forests of Upper Austria to explore, here is the summit of the Dreisesselberg in Bavaria to climb, the top marked by a large white cross. As time passed, he says he didn't mind the

Germans so much, especially when compared to the bloody Reds. He remembers an ex-Luftwaffe pilot, who had been shot down and ended up here in Wolverhampton after the war.

I used to go up to the Star and Garter Hotel and have a drink with him. It was a very popular place, especially Saturday night and Sunday. A lot of people asked me: 'How can you go with that bloody German and have a drink with him?' and I said, 'He was in the air force, I was in the army. He was loyal to Hitler as there is loyalty in any other country or government.' I got on well enough with some Germans here, those who couldn't go back to the East, same story really.

Ł– became a naturalised British citizen in August 1959, when he took the oath of allegiance to the Queen and had his name published in the London Gazette, along with several of his friends and colleagues locally. There he was listed as a machine operator, as were others, along with Poles delineated as a mechanic, coning operator, coal miner or rubber worker. For some years he worked at the Goodyear Tyres factory, then for over 25 years at Star Aluminium, significant employers in the area.

He was born in Mościska in Eastern Galicia, near Lwów – now Lviv as part of Western Ukraine. As a serving member of the Polish Army, he arrived in Britain in 1940, evacuated from France as it fell to the Nazi Blitzkreig. His story continues: *So we got jobs, we got British uniforms, we each got a British ID card. We had to work the mines – that was a hard job. You wouldn't like it, I tell you. Then we built coastal defences from Dundee to Inverness.* He undertook commando training, imagining he would parachute behind the German lines in Poland, but it never came to that. He went on to fight in Normandy, Belgium and Holland, where he was badly wounded. He spent months in hospital in Ostend then Cardiff. In 1947, demobilised, he found himself in the Black Country, at the

Labour Exchange, looking for factory work. They offered him a job at a glassworks.

I liked it because the man who took us around showed us it in his lunchtime. He took us drinking in the dining room in the canteen and I thought, That's bloody great after lunch, a bottle of Guinness or lager and coffee. I had to carry the glassmaker's job to the furnace. It was three pounds ten shillings a week, enough for bus fare to go from Wolverhampton to Bilston and pay for the hostel. I was still smoking, so nothing in the pocket at the end of the week.

There were many such hostels at that time, their occupants Polish, Dutch, Italians, Croatians, Latvians, Ukrainians, Czechs and others. In 1949, at Causeway Green National Service Hostel in Oldbury, Jamaicans clashed with Poles, a fight breaking out at the camp dance hall, apparently in a dispute about one Pole escorting a girl home, with some 50 police being called out to suppress 'the riot'. This government hostel housed some 800 'foreign workers', including over 100 women, all employed in the local factories. The Weekly News reported one resident of Brook Road, at the back of the hostel, as saying "This sort of thing happens far too frequently. We are thoroughly fed up with it. It is not safe for our wives and children to be out after dark... It seems that girls of 14 and 15, who hang out at the hostel at night, are the cause of most of the fights." Perhaps this was less to do with colour prejudice than to do with the fact these new guys in town were equally 'well-turned-out' as my Mother would say – stylish, charming, polite, suave gentleman. In short, they offered competition to the Polish.

Ł– spoke of his long journey to these shores in a matter-of-fact way, as if it was in no way remarkable. Looking back at his past, it did not seem a clear and comprehensive or easy path; guided by a random set of circumstances beyond individual control. *There but for the grace of God go I.* Called up to mandatory

army service prior to the outbreak of war, soon after the invasion of Poland by Nazi and Soviet forces he fled across the border into Hungary along with some forty thousand other Polish troops. There he spent time in an internment camp outside of Budapest, but as the Hungarian government was sympathetic to Hitler, this was a precarious position to be in. Soon there was a plan to get out and try to join a Polish Army regrouping in France. He poured more vodka for me, Scotch for him, more memories also spilling forth.

You put your name on the list and when the agent came and read out the names of twenty fellows, he told us, 'Tonight you get out of the barracks. How you get out of the barracks, that's your business! But you better get out if you want to go to France, if you want to see the future!' We sold our things to the guards – we had good quality army leather belts, cigarette lighters, coats. We didn't need any uniform, so we went out in civvies – freedom clothes. When you get out of the camp, you couldn't have nothing, nothing, not any bit of paper that could prove who you are. So you change your name; you were under a different name and you were a different man. We went to the border of Yugoslavia. There was a meeting arranged at a hotel there. When we get to the hotel, there was a man in civilian clothes and another little chap with him who said: 'We are going to cross the river to Yugoslavia. Who can swim? Who cannot swim? Hands up. Now we go.' There was a small boat, but it was dangerous. It was not a big river but quite deep – you could throw a stone from the other side when you crossed. In Yugoslavia they called to us, 'Brothers! Come on brothers, come on!'

From there they took a train to Split on the Croatian coast, where they were met by a Polish diplomatic representative who put them in digs, gave them pocket money but told them, 'Don't cause any trouble. Don't steal anything. You have got money for drinks, money for cigarettes, you have got accommodation.'

Two weeks later a boat took them to Marseilles. He stares at the photograph of the harbour front. *I remember like it was today. They tell us, now it's time to cast off this civilian attire, put on a freshly pressed uniform, pick up a rifle and off to the army again to defend the Maginot Line. Now time to be hero! Time to fight! We showed the French how to fight! We lasted seventeen days, but the French didn't last thirteen days, they were finished.*

The Polish troops are evacuated from the ports in western France, and sent to camps in Scotland, some 30,000 of them. There they work building anti-invasion fortifications on the coast. In 1944, he took part in the D-Day invasion of Hitler's Fortress Europe. Fill another glass to remember his comrades. *Na zdrowie!*

In joining the army, he had left his parents and his young brother and sister behind. As British and Soviet troops mingled in Berlin, and mounted their separate victory parades in the ruined city in July and September 1945, he wondered what to do, and where they were. Poland was now in the embrace of Stalin. Where would he have gone? What would he have found there? They all heard the rumours.

I knew a fellow who came from close to the Czechoslovakian border, a young man, he was just nineteen. He wanted to go back home. I took him to a Jewish shop of friends in Glasgow and helped him with coupons, clothes and food. He said to me, 'When I go back, I shall remember you and I will write to you – I won't forget.' He never wrote a letter, he just disappeared and I never found what happened to him. So many, many, many never saw one more thing in life.

Better to stick it out here, for how long who knew? As the borders changed, what remained of his family had been forcibly moved westwards. At the time, the official view expressed by Władysław Gomułka, the First Secretary of the

Central Committee of the Polish United Workers' Party, was: 'The Polish-Soviet alliance has brought the Polish nation enormous advantages in the reconstruction and development of its economy, and has become an accepted principle for public opinion in Poland.' But for Ł– a return visit to his homeland, now called the Polish People's Republic, only offered a series of surreal encounters.

He remembers. *At every restaurant or shop I went to there were people behind my back watching me all the time. My brother would say, 'Don't talk nothing. If anybody ask you what's it's like in England tell them it's very bad. Because if you tell them the truth then they won't let you go back. You'll be bloody finished.'*

He doesn't want to visit another Bar Mleczny in Kraków. He's fed up with them. Instead he finds a nice restaurant, with music and soft lighting. As he is about to tuck into his *kotlet schabowy* and *gołąbki kotleta*, a young fellow to one side leans over and whispers, 'Where do you come from?'

England...

'What is it like in England?'

Ł– knows by now what the reply should be: *Oh, in England it's not bloody good.*

The fellow then asks why, so he tells him: *Well, in England you have got to work hard, you've got to work by the clock. If you leave your machine – the clock is clocking how long you have been in the toilet, how long you have been smoking. But in Poland it's beautiful. Seven o'clock in the morning you come out of the factory and the gate, you drink a beer, a vodka, and go back to work. In England they kick you out if you cross the gate.*

There's a man in a crumpled suit on an opposite table, nursing a meagre bowl of soup, listening to this conversation. The man looks familiar, he's sure

he's seen him before. The man interrupts and says: 'Excuse me, are you trying to upset me?'

Ł– replies, *I apologise if I upset you, but I can't see how?*

'Well, you're telling your friend how it's good in Poland and bad in England. Do you work Saturday?'

Yes, we even do Sundays.

'Do you get paid?'

Yes. Time and a half for Saturday. Double for Sunday.

This stranger is purple in the face now, the very same colour as the bowl of *barszcz* in front of him. 'I bloody work in an office and then every Saturday I go to work for the government for nothing. Because Poland was destroyed and has to be rebuilt. They don't pay you a bloody penny for Saturday! And you've got the nerve to say it's bloody bad in England!'

Ł– keeps calm. *Oh I see, but you've got a very good time here. Sir, everybody's happy, everybody drinking vodka.*

There was always someone watching you in those communist times. Always questions and forms to fill in. 'Where are your papers, your stamps, your money?' 'You need these papers, sign these papers, come back in two hours.' 'Where did you get that watch from?' 'Where do you work?' 'What is Star Aluminium? What are you making? Fuel tanks for aeroplanes?' *No, no, Sir, we make foil, tops for the butter milk, for the beer, for chocolate wrappers, for sweets, just like that.* Bloody queues everywhere. And those bloody flies everywhere. *Waiter, there's a fly in my soup*. And that's no joke. The taxis don't turn up. 'Have you got money? How much? You have to leave the money here, when you come back we'll return it – sign this document.' In various guises, they say to you, 'Come, come, I'll change your money, don't tell anybody.' Or they want to buy

your shirt. 'Don't sell them anything,' says your brother, 'you'll end up in jail.' You're walking down the street, sightseeing, and he warns you, 'Don't stare at that cathedral church, it's no longer a church, it's used to store munitions now.' The hotel telephone doesn't function after 11 pm but they serve drinks at 8 o'clock in the morning. Your brother shrugs, eats his hotel breakfast, sausage, potato, gherkins, tells you 'Everybody drinks here.' You say, *I don't drink in the morning, because I would be going daft all day after*. Still the waitress insists, slams down two glasses on the table, goes and brings these small vodka bottles, puts them on the table and walks away a little offended at the incredulous look on your face. Your brother says 'Drink it' and you tell him, *I'm bloody not drinking it*. Then you have one, two, then three and when you pay you tell him, *Mate, I'm not going to stop here for the bloody week. I can't, I'll be shaking all the time. I'm going home.*

That's the moment when the émigré, the refugee, the migrant, one of those many millions of displaced persons from the end of the war in Europe, becomes fixed in a different place, frozen like the ancient amber washed up the shores of the Baltic. Nowadays, Ł– expresses a preference for a good Scotch, sometimes with a drop of Canadian Dry ginger or lemonade. He raises a glass to Solidarność, God bless them, and curses the rotten disease of communism and the Anti-Christ Stalin.

A cold night somewhere in Wola

It's the day before Christmas Eve. Take a few steps outside into the cold, the alcohol still warming your bloodstream and breathe in the night. The city is quiet, the hour late. No-one is out and about, intent on violence or lunacy. Around us the outskirts of Wola, a complex of railway junctions and the shadow of a vast flyover, along which little traffic ventures at this hour. We pass by an old-fashioned vodka bar at the foot of a block of flats, still open for business, smoky and dark, a few forlorn tracks in the snow lead to the door and down the steps. Nearby, old crumbling walls coloured by a yellow light, a splash of illegible graffiti here and there and bizarrely, a crude picture of a washing machine spray-painted onto the plaster. The trees are black, patches of open derelict ground are fenced in with advertising hoardings promising gleaming new apartments. There are fragments of the older city here and there, a machine shop, a faded sign for a car repair yard, below it a *brama*, a stygian tunnel leading to a darker back yard. The shapes of buildings blur, become indistinct against the overwhelming weight of the sky, a featureless leaden grey purple, reflecting back the city's illumination.

We trudge on through the swirling snow towards next tram stop. In the distance, the spectral shape of an old viaduct over the road, from which direction I expect the tram to suddenly materialise, lights flickering, rattling along with its drunkards and would be lovers locked in a late-night embrace, taking them somewhere. I have learned that these last trams, while having a final destination, may not be the destination I have in mind. They can deviate, swing away to the left when in daylight they surely veer to the right. They can proceed north to Park Kaskada when I expect them to proceed east across the Gdansk bridge over the Vistula river to Nowa Praga. It's always an adventure. But you will end up somewhere, if not where intended.

As we wait, stamping our feet, blowing onto our hands, an old fellow shuffles across the road and squints at the timetable in the gloom. He sticks his nose closer and closer. There are no electronic notice boards yet – we are still in the age of printed paper covered in a sheet of thin plastic stuck to a metal pole. He turns and slowly approaches me. He is short and stocky, slightly stooped over, a bushy grey Lech Wałęsa walrus moustache covers his jaw. Nietzsche, who claimed Polish heritage, also sported this style of moustache, as a symbol of nobility and traditionalism. The old guy looks like he just left the late shift at the Lenin shipyard in Gdańsk in the 1980s, carrying an old leather duffel bag, and materialised in the here and now. I'm reminded of an older careworn version of Ian Holm, who played Wałęsa in a 1981 British TV movie about the birth of Solidarność, long before he became better known as Bilbo Baggins.

He comes closer, near enough to see the snowflakes coating his whiskers, his eyes large and rheumy from under the shadow of his cap. He too has been drinking the night away for sure. The moustache quivers. I realise he is asking me about the last tram. Soon I hope. I don't really know how to answer him. I look around for my friend but she is turned away, absorbed in texting someone. My Polish is bad. I mumble, Sorry, I am English. *Mój polski jest słaby. Przepraszam - jestem angielski.*

That's what I intend at least, a kind of apology.

He takes my hand between his mittens, bends and kisses it. He slowly backs away, muttering to himself, making the sign of the cross.

I swear there's tears in his eyes.

There's tears in my friends eyes too. She's sniggering into her snood.

What?

Your pronunciation is terrible. You just told him you're an angel. I know what you meant to say, but you pronounced it all wrong. You said, 'Jestem anielski' not angielski. Anielski is angel-like.

But...?

Look behind you, she gestures.

So there I am, in a long dark coat, snow dampened long hair framing a pale cold narrow face and across the road, directly behind me, is the illuminated thin neo-gothic spire of the Church of St. Wojciech, commemorating the first patron saint of Poland, gloriously rising to the heavens, which seem much closer than usual, under the heft of snow falling. It looks beautiful and unearthly.

The clock is nearly at midnight. I am angel-like.

You've made his Christmas, she says.

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 claimed the stars were misaligned. City planners predicted the metropolis would come to a standstill today. By 8.30 am the road and tram junction at Wileński square, on the right-hand bank of the Vistula, is already jammed with impatient drivers, roaring engines, carbon monoxide coalescing, 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, peer down the tracks into the gloom, anxiously awaiting the appearance of the next over-packed tram. Quicker to walk today, despite the piercing rain, better to walk than stand still and shiver.

The crowds at the lights wait and wait some more, unmoving, like the frozen statues of the four sleeping soldiers (two Polish, two Soviet), their heads bowed, above them three Red Army men in heroic combat positions, the so-called Monument of Comradeship, the first to be raised in ruined post-war Waraw in November 1945. When first unveiled, they were plaster casts painted to look like bronzes, and later replaced with the real thing. Wihin a few years they will be removed, ostensibly to make way for an entrance to the new metro station, but all across the country such Soviet era memorials will fall – in 2016 parliament passes a law that bans public monuments and symbols promoting communism.

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 elderly 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, perhaps thinking how he might repair it. After all, this area still has a reputation for local crafts workshops, the new intertwined with the ancient.

Construction work is deconstructing the city. The buses, once reliable, arrive later and later. Despite their unpredictability, still passengers obsessively consult the timetables. The new Mayor has promised to fix everything but it seems everything needs fixing at once and she sets about the task with the all the gusto and energy of a zealot. Consequently, bridges, roads, buildings, parks, pavements, tram lines are all dug up and rearranged. But nothing is finished, with winter nearly upon the turbulent city. It looks 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, sometimes appear like startled rabbits rather than a disciplined military formation, their practiced and smooth choreography disturbed by the broken lines of the pavement and shifting heaps of gravel. Occasional looks of panic as they break step and stumble 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, one wonders? Who could tell, amidst the chaos?

Near to the indoor shopping mall, the street hawkers have their wares laid out in the busy subway under Targowa Street. 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.

Only those commuters who stand for a moment in the shadow of the Orthodox Basicala feel any sense of peace this morning, look up at the domes and imagine faint choral harmonies drifting somewhere behind the gusts of wind and rain. On the other side of the building, children and parents leave their apartment blocks and make 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 little 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! Come now, we'll miss the bears if we don't hurry.' But the bears will not be strolling about their zoo enclosure by the edge of the road this particular morning. They look in vain. 'Mama, where are they?' And her Mother will have to reassure 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.'

We walk briskly along Jagiellonska, breathing in the unpleasant exhaust fumes of the motionless vehicles. J– pretends that he does not have another full day of painting walls ahead. He 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 has a solid hangover – it feels like the globe is spinning out of control and he is clinging on for dear life. He dreams of moving to Żoliborz, where life is calmer. Next year, he tells me, next year he will for sure, it's really something to look forward to.

We pass a nun, entirely weatherproof, who stands outside Loreto Chapel, holding a posy of fresh-cut flowers. She stares up at the leaves of the chestnut and maple trees as they flutter down, oblivious to the rain on her face like the tears of Christ shed for unrepenting sinners. 'Morning devotions,' says J–. 'The ways of the Lord are indeed mysterious.'

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 a priest passes and not so silently once he 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. Eventually, they dig a huge hole and uncover the culprit, an ancient metal pump whose seams have cracked apart. The clean water of Praga Północ 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.

We take a tram across the river, a short but unpleasant journey this morning, then jump off at the first stop, dizzy from this sardine-can experience. The tram disappears into the tunnel cut under the Old Town, rumbling

ominiously past the traffic backed up all the way from Rondo Kercelak. We take the steps up to the main square and walk along Krakówskie Przedmieście. The dull skies open again, a downpour of arctic ferocity, sending the temperatures plummetting. Sodden enough, we duck into the nearest cafe.

J– tells me 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 completely emphathised with this world weary view. He remembered a woman in the next row, who 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 Greenaway 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 kindly shook her awake at the end.

It's over, he said.

What happened? she asked.

He died, he answered.

Ah, life is not beautiful, she said.