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Jola

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Polish bus drivers are naturally optimistic, and thus are constantly being surprised when caught by red lights. On those rare times when the bus wasn't crowded and it pulled to a suicide stop, I've seen a baby carriage shoot down the center aisle like a bowling ball. Poles are used to this, and there's always someone who stops the carriage before it goes out the front window. More typically, though, the bus will be close-packed—people crammed in, carrying everything from stepladders to enormous cabbages—and when the driver hits the brakes, everyone is pressed so intimately against one another, there's nothing to do but roll your eyes or propose marriage. I've been prevented from doing the latter by my inadequacy with the language. Pressed against women so beautiful that they made my teeth

hurt, I could only mutter things like "Oh my," hoping they'd recognize it as English and reply in kind, which they never did.

I met Jola on the bus. It was a cold and rainy September afternoon, and I hadn't been in Warsaw long. I had fought my way onto the bus, but had been muscled backward on the steps by some very tough old ladies, and the door closed painfully on my foot.

"Stop the bus!" I yelled. "Help!"

Some savior pushed the right button and the door opened, but the crowd was so thick, I was pushed even farther out, and this time the door whacked me on my arms and shoulder before popping me permanently inside, except for the bottom of my raincoat. I was furious.

"Damn this bus!" I shouted. "And damn everybody in it!" In my two weeks in Warsaw no one had understood a word I said, and I was getting used to speaking into a void.

"That's really not necessary, or even very intelligent," said a woman sitting in the seat nearest the door.

My anger, however, was stronger than my surprise. "Listen," I said, "in America if the buses got crowded like this, we'd tip them over and burn them."

"Well," the woman said, "that may be constructive but it's not our way. We just keep our feet out of the doors."

We were at the next stop, and I was backed out of the bus by passengers getting off and buffeted by people trying to get on at the same time. I decided to walk the rest of the way, despite the rain, and as I did I thought about that brief conversation.

I'd been too upset to gather more than a vague impression of an attractive, well-dressed woman about my age (which is thirty-two) who spoke English with only a slight accent. What stuck with me was the feeling that she'd been staring at me, even after I left the bus and began walking away. It made me nervous. Was she going to report me to the police? I didn't know Polish law—maybe you're not allowed to swear on buses. Creating a Disturbance in a Public Vehicle. I'd been warned about the Warsaw police;

I'd even seen them working over a drunk or two. I wanted nothing to do with them. And because Poles for the most part ride the buses and trams in total silence, our encounter was particularly strange. I went home and made myself a Polish martini: straight Zytunia vodka with an olive swiped from the commissary tossed in. A terrific drink. I felt a lot better and forgot the whole thing. After a few of those drinks I would forget who I was.

I was—am—Paul Willis, that's who. I live in a modest condo in Tampa, illustrate magazine stories and, every once in a while, a cover. That's where the real money is—in covers. I got by all right (Florida has no income tax), but my ex-wife Alison had always wanted me to teach; she said it was because the money would be steadier, but secretly I thought she wanted to be able to say she was the wife of a professor. Professors are reliable, unlike artists. Still, she was right—we were always short of money until she got a job. And that was what did us in.

My conclusion after our breakup was that marriage is dependent on the dependence of women. Once Alison was independent, what did she need me for? We had no children, neither of

us possessing the patience to deal with them. But marriage must have an element of need; desire's too unstable a vehicle, and when that disappears you may as well get out the shredder. Alison shredded me and then threw me out.

Of course, this is a story about Jola, not Alison. We were divorced and that's all. Then Poland beckoned.

Why Poland? I was commissioned to illustrate a large double-volume collection of Polish fairy tales. This was 1978 and the new Pope and Isaac Bashevis Singer's winning the Nobel Prize had given a strong impetus to the Polish-American market. I had a brilliant idea. Wouldn't the publishers want to send me over there, for authenticity? So I applied all over, at magazines from New York to L.A., and wound up with a bagful of commissions from food, sport, art, music magazines ("I'll go to Chopin's house," I told them)—anyone who wanted sketches of things Polish. Combined with a check and encouragement from the fairy tale folks, I gathered enough together to finance a reasonably luxurious six months in Warsaw.

Mainly I needed a change. Poland was going to fix me up, and it did, although not at first.

Jola was waiting for me three days later when I got on the bus at Sobieskiego, the same spot as before. I recognized her right away. She moved a large bag of groceries from the seat next to her and motioned for me to sit down. I wasn't used to sitting when there were women standing, but I didn't want to cause an international public incident, so I sat down. ("You phony pig," Alison would have said). The bag was too big for Jola, and with much idiotic nodding and smiling we transferred it to my lap, putting my leg to sleep within two stops.

"Your foot is better?" she asked.

"Yes, fine," I said. "Wonderful."

She had large gray eyes, a gracefully curved nose and a positively sinful lower lip. She was so bundled up, that's about all I could tell.

"I hope you are enjoying your time in Poland," she said.

"Oh yes," I lied. "Very much!"

"Yes," she agreed, smiling. "Poland is like living in prison with wonderful people and good music."

I couldn't think of anything to say to this, so I tried shifting the bag to my

other leg. Why was she smiling? Was this some sort of test?

"You're an American, I can tell," she said.

"That's right. Paul Willis, from Tampa, Florida."

"The Large Orange," she said. That stopped me again. Did she think all American cities had nicknames about fruits and vegetables? Madison, the Big Cheese. Boston the Little Bean.

But within a few stops I had told her my age, what I was doing in Warsaw and where I was doing it. I didn't even know her name. When I got up to leave I nearly fell to my numb knees, and she caught me by my elbow.

"My name is Jola Malicka," she said as I was about to get off the bus. I was staying at the Bristol Hotel, a truly decadent bourgeois building and one of the few authentic structures left standing by the Nazis, who had quartered there. My room was spacious, the bed set in an alcove separated from the main section by a curtain. The bar downstairs was charming, the food terrible (the bread seemed to harden between bites), the service slow, the music—usually a hunched-over pianist—excellent. I thought of what Jola had said.

Conversation with Poles in those days was a tricky business. The natural ebb and flow of questions was more shadowy in Poland than in sunny Tampa. They thought obliquely, experts at reading between the lines. If we see a photograph of an accident, for example, we might wonder who was hurt, what the damages were. A Pole was likely to think, Why is that man in the raincoat standing next to the woman with the briefcase? And there were so many topics that seemed difficult to discuss: communism, the economy, Secretary Gierek, the Jewish situation, strikes in the northern cities.

At the same time, they were often outspoken about politics. A bus driver would drive past the Russian-built Palace of Culture and spit noisily out the window. Shortly after my arrival someone blew up a bank in downtown Warsaw, and the party-line papers said it was a gas explosion. I overheard some Poles at the Embassy joking that, because there were no gas lines into that building, Gierek was sure to be nominated for the Nobel Prize in Physics for changing electricity into gas. It all kept me unbalanced, and Jola just added to it. Was she a dissident or a secret-service person trying me out,

or a pretty young woman with a typical Polish sense of humor? Whatever, I wanted no part of it. I simply wanted to do my work.

Actually, I wasn't doing much work. I walked around, I took some photographs. I read in the library of the American embassy. I seemed to sleep a lot. I spent my time writing to friends, sent postcards to my nieces and nephews, and drank coffee in the Bristol café. I worked on some desultory sketches, but basically decided that I could do it all from photographs of *Stare Miasto*, the ancient center of Warsaw rebuilt in gorgeous detail after the Germans blew it up at the end of the War. I could take all my photos home and work in the much more congenial weather and atmosphere of my studio in Tampa. But I was too embarrassed to go home early.

About a week after our second meeting I received a note from Jola, brought by the hotel porter. She invited me to a small party with English-speaking Poles who, she wrote, could help me in my picture-gathering and introduce me to the Polish life in a more authentic manner than my library research and scattered walking was

doing. Poland doesn't advertise itself very well, she said.

She lived in an ugly Russian-built apartment complex right on Sobieskiego, which was on a direct line from the Bristol and easy for me to find. With a slight fluttering of nerves—hopeful for a seduction, fearful of an entrapment—I got on the bus and went.

Her apartment, on the third floor, was striking. In counterpoint to the chintzy construction of the building, her furniture was matched, solid and old, giving the impression of heirlooms that have seen better surroundings. The walls were covered with artwork and posters that at first glance seemed grotesque; a closer look confirmed it—snakes crawled out of eye sockets, potatoes sprouted from skulls, books bled.

"You can see the psychological state of our country," she said as I stared at them.

There were just two other guests there—a tall, slender woman named Bozena, somewhat younger than Jola; and a bearded, shaggy-haired man about my size—that is to say, average build, five feet nine inches. A nice comfortable height, my mother used to

say as I stared enviously at my taller younger brothers.

“Good evening,” the man said. “I am Pawel Woźniak. We have almost the same name.” His eyes were humorous and intelligent, peeking out from all that hair. His English was excellent. Bożena’s—“Call me please Bo”—was marginal.

Jola was a knockout. She wore a deep-blue formal dress that was both modest and flattering to her full figure. A thin silver necklace and silver earrings accentuated her long neck; she had knotted her hair gracefully on top of her head, without pins—I was later to see her perform this miraculous operation—giving her a queenly bearing. And she was as good as her word. The three of them all had specific and helpful suggestions as to where I should take photographs or make sketches: certain restaurants, cafés, markets, buildings, museums, galleries, concert halls, sports arenas. I wrote it all down furiously, even when I didn’t understand what they were saying, trying to seem like a responsible and serious American. By the time the evening was over, it was clear that Jola had taken me under her wing. She was a free-lance translator and had more

time than Bożena and Pawel, who held regular jobs at the *Uniwersytet Warszawski* of a confusingly scholastic nature. Somewhat disappointingly, it turned out that Bo was staying in Jola’s apartment that evening, and Pawel and I headed home at the same time. He was carrying a large parcel in a cheap plastic bag.

As we left each other at the bus stop he handed me a thick roll of about twenty posters.

“This is to remember me by,” he said. “These are posters by the best Polish artists—Starowicki and the rest—most of them signed. You will understand Poland by studying them.”

“Oh no,” I said, truly moved. “I can’t accept this many. This is too much.”

He had a very firm manner, and pressed them on me. “Let us just say that I am repaying American generosity.” We shook hands as my bus pulled in. “I hope we meet again,” he said. But we never did.

My first date with Jola was at the National Tennis Stadium to watch a Davis Cup match—*Puchar Davisa*—between Poland and Italy. The large crowd was dominated by about a dozen voluble Italians, chanting the names of their players; “Bar-ra-ZAT-ti” or “Pa-

nat-TA," they yelled, while the Poles sat politely applauding the spectacular play. Toward the end, a single Pole, perhaps overcome by sips of vodka, began chanting back, "Mac-a-RO-ni!" and occasionally, mysteriously, in English, "Su-per-MAR-ket!" But few voices joined him.

It was a wonderful day. We had dinner in a Hungarian restaurant. We walked around Warsaw. On Krakowskie Przedmieście we sat down near the old statue of Copernicus holding his celestial sphere, and fed red squirrels and pigeons. She took me to a *Pewex* store that took only "hard currency" (dollars, francs, marks and pounds), and I bought some wooden dolls for my niece. I was about to fall in love. In *Stare Miasto* she took a little skip to catch up to me, and I was a goner. She even admired my moustache, which was the irresistible thing to do. Alison once told me—she was one of those people who love to tell the truth, especially if it hurts—that I had the most undistinguished face she had ever seen. This ultimately proved helpful: I grew my moustache, about which I'm extraordinarily vain. It's thick and bushy, still black, with just a

smattering of premature white hair to make it dignified.

During the next few weeks I seemed to make progress on all fronts. With Jola I took hundreds of photographs, made notes and sketches. We saw "Hamlet" by William Szekspir, listened to Chopin outdoors in Łazienki Park, concerts at the Filharmonia Narodowa; we saw "La Vie Parisienne"—*Życie Paryskie*—at the Operetka Warszawska; we bought goat cheese at the open market. Poland became suddenly rich for me, and has remained that way ever since.

And our relationship hadn't stood still. We had drinks in my poster-filled room at the Bristol and in her apartment, and had gone considerably past the good-night kiss. Jola wasn't at all coy, but like some kind of Polish Cinderella, each midnight she slipped away.

We often talked about traveling. She'd been to England (long ago), Rumania, Bulgaria, Czechoslovakia, and I had been all through Europe with Alison. When I mentioned how Alison and I had liked West Berlin, she exclaimed that she'd love to see it.

"Come with me," I said. "I'll take you there."

Her gray eyes opened wider, and I could feel myself falling into them. Then she smiled and took my hand.

"*Tak,*" she said. "Yes. Why not? That sounds like a fine idea."

Nothing is easy in Poland, and there were many arrangements to make, but the American embassy people smoothed my way. They like me because I had got my room on my own, changed money on the black market without bothering them, and didn't pester them for commissary privileges. They let me use the library and buy stamps, and every once in a while I'd stroll through the commissary "on the way to buy stamps," and swipe a jar of olives. Greg Smith, the cultural attaché, told me I was much more independent than the Fulbright professors who supposedly came for a Polish experience, and then fell all over one another scratching to get at the peanut butter in the commissary. He helped get my visa and airplane ticket.

Jola's visa was slow coming through, but she got it. She had the idea of flying from the Baltic port of Gdansk; it was a little cheaper, and she could show me the area before I showed her West Berlin. "It's the birthplace of Schopenhauer, you know,"

she told me. Nothing could have been further from my mind than Schopenhauer. Jola had a friend with an apartment in the resort town of Sopot, next to Gdansk; the friend wanted to visit Warsaw, so they agreed to exchange apartments for a week. We'd stop in Sopot overnight, fly to Berlin the next morning, stay four days and then return for a couple of days to see Gdansk.

"This is not too expensive for you?" she asked anxiously. I stuck a 1000-zloty note in my mouth and began chewing it; she laughed and pulled it out. "You're crazy," she said. "You don't know anything about money."

She was right. But I did know I could get a thousand zlotys for nine dollars on the black market, though the official rate was more than forty dollars. I was in good shape. I was standing on my head out of sheer happiness.

We arrived in Sopot by train in the dead of winter. The boardwalk and the town itself were practically deserted, except for the restless gulls wheeling and dipping. The emptiness of it all delighted Jola.

"Poles do not understand the American fad of togetherness," she

said. "We spend most of our energy trying to find some time, some place, to be alone. I suppose it's because we have to ride crowded buses and trams so much. Of course," she added, "we keep our feet out of the doors," and she put her head on my shoulder and gave me the wide-eyed look.

We ate at the imposing Grand Hotel, sharing the large dining hall with only one other couple. In America, this would be closed in a week. I stretched out our dinner with an after-dinner drink and got greatly interested in the scenery on our walk back to our apartment.

I was suddenly feeling like that early Polish king Boleslaw the Shy. Not so Jola. As I closed the door she pressed herself against me. Her eyes were shining and she whispered, "Poor baby!" and led me to the small bedroom, fragrant with flowers left by her friend. I watched her let down her beautiful hair, and then she turned out the light.

Sometime toward morning I woke up. The room was shadowy, but I could see she was watching me, leaning over on one shapely elbow. She reached over and pulled my moustache. I caught her hand.

"You were marvelous," I said.

She smiled sleepily. "I couldn't have done it alone!" She sat up and began to put up her hair with deft fingers.

"That's amazing," I said, "but it's too early . . ." Jola smiled again. "You're absolutely right." Once more she let it down, and I pulled her to me.

Considerably later, I awoke in the cold morning light. I could hear the shower running and I put the pillow over my head, dozing on and off, until I realized that the shower must have been going for at least an hour. Either Jola had left the water running or she was going to shrivel up like a prune.

I got out of bed, stretching happily, and walked into the bathroom. She wasn't there, so I turned off the shower.

"Let's have a little efficiency around here," I shouted to the apartment in general. She wasn't in the living room either, and I found her note on the kitchen table.

"Darling, here is fresh bread, and cheese and milk are in the refrigerator. Our flight has been delayed for a day, and I am going to the airlines office to make sure they handle our tickets correctly. No one speaks English there, so please wait here and don't worry."

I didn't doubt it. Everything got delayed in Poland. The miracle was, they let us know about it. I must have slept through the telephone call. I smiled to myself: I could have slept through a German blitzkrieg.

By 2 p.m. she still hadn't arrived, so I decided to go to lunch at the Grand Hotel. The minute I put on my jacket I knew my passport, visa and airplane ticket were missing.

Within Poland in those days, you didn't move without the proper identification, particularly in a strange city. Ever since I arrived here, I'd patted my passport fifty times a day: security blanket. I grabbed for my wallet. Relief flooded my chest as I saw all my money, which was considerable, still there; but on closer examination I found I was missing my American Express card, driver's license and probably one or two other cards. I still had my return trip to Warsaw.

Well, I wept. I shouted. I broke a lamp. I drank the bottle of vodka in the refrigerator. I didn't even know how to call the airport to see if the plane had left at 11 a.m. as scheduled, but anyway I was sure it had. I'd been taken, that's all. I wasn't ready to figure out why.

The next day, disheveled but sober, I made my way back by train to Warsaw, in a trip filled with more minor humiliations than I care to relate. They didn't affect me much: I was filled to the brim with my major humiliation.

Four days later, while I was lying in bed staring at the ornate molding of my Hotel Bristol bedroom, Greg Smith called me. I had a special delivery letter from London at the embassy. I got right up, of course.

When I went in to pick up the thick envelope, Greg stared at my unshaven state. He was of the old school—a shave and a clean shirt every morning, or the natives will get you.

"I thought you were supposed to be in West Berlin," he said, shaking his head.

I didn't answer. Outside, I read the letter. "My dear Paul," the letter began in Jola's familiar, sloping handwriting. "I am truly sorry. You perhaps would have helped us out without this Byzantine plot, but we could not take the chance. You remember Pawel, the bearded man in my apartment? He is one of our best-known dissidents, a great patriot. We had long planned to marry, but he could not get work in Poland, and there was no way for him

to get a visa to leave the country either. It was only a matter of time before they took mine away too. Or arrested him, or something. And then I met you—the same size, the same age, even the same initials (though 'Michta' is not his real name). And you could get all those things he couldn't—passport, visa, airplane ticket. And so we used you. I enclose, however, all your cards and papers. We are all right now.

Of course, my future husband doesn't know the *entire* story. Men are such children, after all. But he is a very good man. And so are you. Goodby. Jola."

I felt angry for hours, stupid for days and miserable for weeks; but gradually I began to feel better. I'd been caught up in some international drama far beyond my importance, and all I could feel in the end was thankful to have taken part in it. And I came to realize that Jola had given me a gift, something I'd needed as much as her fiancé needed my papers—she'd made me feel desirable again.

I'm still in Warsaw, trying to get my visa extended. Poland loves its artists and there's plenty of work for me to do, so Greg Smith thinks it will be no

problem. I've already sold some of my sketches to *Polska*, Poland's national magazine meant for export. Right now, my sister and niece have taken over my condo in Tampa. We shall see.

Life isn't easy here, but anything can happen and I like that feeling. I've even stopped being depressed about Alison and now when I look at a woman on a crowded bus, I know beyond the shadow of a doubt that the possibilities are endless.

