All the World's Dreams.
A Sentimental Journey through Poland.

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PROLOGUE

Land of Smoke

I built on sand
And it perished,
I built on rock
And it perished.
Now I'm starting to build
with the smoke from a chimney.

Leopold Staff, *Foundations*

On the evening of the tenth of December 1896, people thronged into the Paris Théâtre de l'Œuvre for a première that would make history.

Before the performance began, a stocky man in a baggy black suit with hair plastered down like Bonaparte sat down at a little table in front of the curtain. The twenty-three-year-old writer felt obliged to introduce his work: the actors hadn't had enough time and the set designers, including Pierre Bonnard and Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, had been up all night. He added that different interpretations of the play were possible and ended with the announcement that the action was set in 'Nowhere – that is, Poland'.

The writer was Alfred Jarry and the play *Ubu roi*. It was an expanded version of *Les Polonais* from 1888, and the first in a series of Ubu dramas. It started out as a satire on Jarry's chemistry teacher, but developed into a play about a greedy, narrow-minded tyrant who always said 'merdre' instead of 'merde'. Ubu spoke his mind. Initially, in his burlesque fashion, he chose the side of the unscrupulous masters, but later he sided with the slaves. He felt freer in a real prison than in that other prison – society – where freedom was merely an illusion.

The opening night of the first *Ubu* caused a riot. It was an assault on bourgeois values and 'good taste'. Some of those present used a post horn to calm the tumultuous public. The play went down in art history as the prelude to the twenty-first century avant-garde.

Nulle part, c'est-à-dire, la Pologne.

I read *Ubu* for the first time at high school. This equating of the name of a country with 'nowhere' disturbed me. I knew the route from school to home and from our house to another house; you could map it out. Maps of countries and continents appeared on the television news, all carefully coloured in. There hadn't been any uncharted areas on the globe for a long time now. So how could a country be called *Nowhere*? Where was it? Not roughly, not approximately, but in reality. As long as you can't say exactly where something is, it doesn't exist.

Even in those days I wanted to travel to that Nowhere. To a country that was nowhere yet had a name. Jarry didn't say *no man's land* because then I could have imagined something: no man's land was a land where no one lived and that belonged to no one, a zone between border posts for instance or the strip of land between the West and East German border patrols during the Cold War, but *Nowhere*? …

What did I hope to find in that Nowhere? Something that didn't exist in the country where I lived? If I managed to find Nowhere, it would instantly become Somewhere. I would be able to draw a map of it, a geographical one and an internal one that looked as exciting as the colourful Terra Incognita of the great explorers.

Where is Poland? I wondered, but I meant, *What is Poland?*

It sounds like a fairy-tale: once upon a time there was a land called Nowhere.

The only difference with the fairy-tale is that it really does exist. I've seen it with my own eyes.

Many years have passed since I became acquainted with Jarry, and nowadays you know Poland exists just from reading the newspapers.

On the same day that John Paul II celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of his papacy, a man stopped me on the street in a small Polish town. He thrust picture postcards into my hand, photographs of a very old Pope and kitschy watercolours of the Virgin Mary, who was meant to lead Poland through the gloom of history. He simultaneously held forth on the misery that would befall Poland after it joined the European Union.

'Yesterday it was Moscow that ordered us around,' he concluded, 'tomorrow it will be Brussels.'

I returned the postcards, mumbling that I wasn't interested, and continued walking. I heard curses behind me, swearwords not found in the dictionary. In the first place, he had noticed I was a foreigner, despite the fact that I had spent more than fifteen years trying to master that beautiful yet impossible Polish language. In the second he associated my mumbling with a typical Brussels arrogance – namely that everything I was *for* he was against and vice versa. He was probably right on that count.

That same evening I talked about this with the director of the municipal theatre, whom I had met through the grapevine. His name is irrelevant. For the sake of discussion, I'll call him 'B', as in 'B' for Bacchus.

We drank a pint of warm beer in a dark cellar café, each snivelling more loudly than the other because outside, winter had suddenly set in and we were still wearing sandals and light raincoats. He reminded me of Rubens's Bacchus – stately, rotund, dishevelled hair – except I assume the god of wine was less nervous. Early in the conversation I learned he was a homosexual who, as a theatre director, was not averse to scandals and who moonlighted as a cookery writer for one of the largest newspapers.

'Interesting combination, most un-Polish,' I ventured to say.

After which Mr B fired away with a description of what he considered to be the typical Pole: someone who flogs picture postcards near the gates of an old city, like the man I had given the cold shoulder that afternoon.

I hate clichés, but I know there is a grain of truth in each of them, so I listened carefully.

'The typical Pole,' expounded Mr B., 'by which we mean the real Pole, the true Pole, the Polish citizen who's more Catholic than Wojtyła, who has invariably just downed a McDonald's hamburger and who is fully convinced that after the expansion of the European Union, doctors will flock to Poland from Brussels and Amsterdam to hand out abortion and euthanasia pills left and right. This kind of true Pole believes the Texan Electric Chair is as important as the Papal Throne, and would prefer to see all homosexuals, lesbians and bi-sexual perverts rotting away for life behind the barbed wire of the prison at Wołów in Silesia. In other words, a real right-wing asshole who thinks Stalin is a bastard and Hitler just a dirty rascal. Who hates Jews because they are communists in disguise who would crucify Jesus all over again given the opportunity. Who cannot imagine that even the tiniest portion of the population of his city could include – you name it – Chinese, blacks, Muslims. *That* is the true Pole,' blared Mr B., 'a small ugly mongrel, the product of the strangest crossbreeding, who would stand next to a noble purebred in any presidential box in the world and imagine himself to be equally beautiful.'

For his part, my friend Bacchus, with his goblet of Okocim beer, had a half-German anti-Semitic father and … a Polish Jewess for a mother! So he was a quarter German, half Jewish and for the rest, Polish. I suspect he had some Greek blood in him as well, given how closely he resembled the Bacchus from Rembrandt's painting. Perhaps he even had Flemish roots, a distant relative who once modelled for Bacchus in Rubens's studio in Antwerp.

I felt giddy from his tirade and took a sip, but Bacchus laughed heartily.

'It's a cliché, but that's really what they're like, the true Poles.'

We then had a decent conversation about the present state of Polish culture. What did he think of filmmaker and Oscar-winner Andrzej Wajda whom I had met a couple of days before? 'A corpse.' And of Piesiewicz, now a senator but in a previous life set-designer for Kieślowski's *Decalogue*, whom I had also met? 'A Catholic fundamentalist, like Kieślowski himself, who's only the darling of the West for snobbish reasons.'

He was amused that we disagreed. Wajda is one of the great chroniclers of Polish history whose films I've seen countless times and Kieślowski critiqued Polish Catholicism like no one before him, so that as a non-Pole you could even feel sympathy for that typically Polish religion.

My Bacchus was no more typically Polish than he was maliciously un-Polish. He stared at me with his big brown eyes as if to say: of course Wajda and Kieślowski and all of Poland's other famous grandmothers and grandfathers are Molochs, because what would the Poles be without them? Behind him the image of a contorted, naked human body hanging on the wall of the club lit up, as if it had been tossed out of a spaceship in the middle of outer space.

'You know,' he said after a while, 'that true Pole I was talking about, he's the Pole who chooses to define himself that way because at least it makes him into *something*, even if it is an echo from the distant past, from another era. Because there is nothing else. Absolutely nothing. Anything of any value at all in Poland is simply *not* Polish, you name it – Jewish, Lithuanian, Prussian, Austrian …'

'That reminds me,' I suggested carefully, 'of the question, *Where is Poland?*'

'Shall I tell you?' he replied, grinning slyly. 'Shall I tell you where Poland is?'

'Please do.'

'Leave Eden through the backdoor, where God kicks out the overly eager ones, continue walking for a few centuries, and if you're lucky, you'll run into Poland, that is, if it hasn't completely dissolved in its own shadow.'

'Poland's story is that of being driven out of Paradise,' I repeated pedantically. 'That's what Czesław Miłosz says.'

'Another one of those grandfathers. But *this* kind.' He did a thumbs-up. 'Listen. This is what you need to do. Go down into the catacombs of Polish culture, into the Dantesque circles of the Polish underworld, and observe the corpses and the fundamentalists and the proud poodles sniffing at the backsides of their heroes.'

'So there's absolutely no return to Paradise possible?'

'The only Paradise with the "P" of Poland is an imagined Paradise, a Paradise made of chimney smoke. And that too, my good friend, you have to breathe in.'

'Where can I find it?'

Bacchus raised his broad shoulders, then his bushy eyebrows.

'For now, right here,' he said, waving away the cigarette smoke. 'Shall we have another pint?'

Poland, Nowhereland, the Paradise made from chimney smoke. I've been travelling all over this country for twenty years now. Occasionally I've slept in a hotel suite, but more often I've ended up in an overpopulated one-and-a-half-room flat in Soviet-style barracks, in the laundry room of the Polish Tourist Country-Lovers' Society or PTTK for short, or simply, in the shed of an old *kolchoz*.

I always had a folder full of maps in my pocket, which I studied endlessly.

Poland began as a collection of loose shreds, developed over the course of a few centuries into one of the most powerful nations in Europe – and one of the most tolerant – then disappeared completely off the face of the earth. History books tell me how it became a bone of contention for rival armies over the centuries. One book even calls Poland *God's Playground*, another calls it *The Devil's Dance Floor*.

It was on this battlefield of God and the devil that I went searching for victims, for the stories of a few individuals that tell what it was like behind the world of triumph and tragedy – in everyday life. I took the souls out of their coffins and kept my ear close to the heads of those I met.

In doing so I noticed two things.

The first was that when I talked about Poland with Dutch-speaking friends, what emerged were ignorance or sky-high clichés. Poland: a crippled Pope, incurable piety, Frederic Chopin's death march, the Warsaw Pact, and on top of this, a lot of corruption, smuggling and moonlighting …

It always stopped there. The recent coverage of the European Union has added the characteristic feature of Polish stubbornness to this list. Poland, the Trojan horse that smuggles in an undiscerning Americanism. Poland, the champion of the missed opportunity.

In the best case, someone remembers the names of Nobel Prize winners Madame Curie, Lech Wałesa, Czesław Miłosz, Wisława Szymborska, each name more difficult to pronounce than the last.

And there's one last stigma that clings to Poland: that it's grey, cold and unsafe there.

The second thing I noticed was when I was in Poland itself.

When I told Poles I was writing a book about their culture, I was often greeted with a scornful reply.

'What did you call it? Polish culture?' laughed one Polish employee of *Arte* television, as he sipped from his Italian coffee. 'Does that exist?'

Excuse me, but I read Polish books, watch Polish films, listen to Polish music. And that's not all. I know the names of Polish kings, Polish customs, Polish legends, Polish meals … And here's this fellow, a friendly hawk-eyed forty-year-old, the employee of a cultural network, saying forthrightly: 'Poland doesn't exist.'

'But if Poland doesn't exist, where are we now?' I asked.

We were sitting in an outdoor café in a Polish provincial capital, where you heard as much Russian spoken as German and gypsies from the Balkan played Viennese waltzes.

The hawk grinned.

Later I watched his television coverage: ruins overgrown with plane trees and ferns; Caspar David Friedrich paintings come to life.

On another occasion a Polish television announcer in Warsaw snapped at me: 'Come and live here for a while, then you'll see what kind of wilderness it is.'

Nonsense. I've lived here often enough. I live here now. I'm writing this here, in Poland.

I had a dilemma. At home I heard that Poland was a blank spot on the map. In Poland they told me Polish culture didn't exist. Did this mean I'd been travelling for all those years in a country with no character of its own, while the newspapers were full of articles about the Polish identity, Polish values and Polish traditions?

It took a long time before I understood those angry remarks, before I too was able to say: *perhaps Poland doesn't exist, perhaps the Polish culture is an illusion*.

Gradually I discovered that Poland was the centre of several cultures, that the Polish story was a collection of testimonies from border regions and that Polish history was thus also the story of Poland's neighbouring countries.

I scour the map. There's Poland. Is it some insane project with a triumphant history and tragic heritage? A void in the world? A violated queen in hiding? Europe's armpit?

This is where my trip begins, a sentimental journey. I start in a distant past, when the word ‘Poland’ was used for the first time. Then I travel to the capital cities of Gniezno, Cracow and Warsaw. Halfway through, I make a detour to Gdańsk, where I follow the bloody trail of the struggle for freedom. Finally I visit the western and eastern borders, which have shifted constantly over the years.

I ask the same questions wherever I go: where am I? And why is it that both God and the devil like to spend so much time here?

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I talk with Szymborska about the despair that permeates all her poems. We talk about the war and the starvation camps, about the destruction of anonymous individuals and the barbarity of statistics, which reduces everything human to rounded-off numbers. But mostly we talk about how those disasters lurk behind every perception.

In *Nonrequired Reading*, for instance, Szymborska records her scepticism through seemingly unimportant themes. She discusses books nobody knows yet or which have ended up in second-hand bookshops or rummage sales, and casts a surprising new light on them. Books like *Small Atlas of Butterflies*, *How To Become Strong and Supple*, *Everything You Need to Know about Housekeeping*, *A History of Old Paper*, *Live Happily Without Worries*.

Szymborska cites an example from her book.

'There's so much you can learn from a volume like *When the Apple Trees Blossom*, written by a connoisseur of fruit farming,' she says. 'Take the spiderling, for example,' she laughs, half citing and half narrating. 'I had an unnatural predeliction for spiderlings. Seemingly innocent creatures. Just little purplish-red spiders … I considered them one of nature's most delightful whims. They were at the top of my list for life's charm and nonchalance. But it turns out they suck the best juices out of the apples and plums! Can I conceal that fact? Or do I not have to betray them? Can I go on loving them?' She stops for a moment, then continues: 'Loving them … while, at the same time biting into an apple that's only healthy because all that little spiderling's brothers and sisters were gassed in time?' She pauses again briefly. 'So, hypocritically and perversely love them? If there's no other way … If all our human love of nature is already ridden with hypocrisy and perversity …'

This is the way the poetess of detail writes. With each example she exposes more of herself. The little spider is the leading character in a poem, the main image, but gradually becomes the protagonist in a dark tragedy.

'It reminds me,' I say, 'of what you wrote about that baby book.'

'That's right,' laughs Szymborska, 'what was it I said again …?'

'There's no way at all I can be certain anymore,' I begin, 'that a book about infant care isn't rolling off the presses at this very moment …'

'… whose surprising point is the destruction of the world,' concludes Szymborska.

Later, as I walk through the streets of Cracow, Szymborska's sentences keep running through my head. Cracow bears witness to the barely missed catastrophe. I entered Cracow thinking of Shu, the ancient Egyptian god of air, whose task it was to separate the earth from the sky and whom humans were to treat cautiously, otherwise everything would collapse. Unintentionally, as I converse with Szymborska, this thought occurs to me again.

After the imposing statues, the knights on their holy steeds and the alert tower guards, Wisława Szymborska appears on my path as a creature of human proportions. The way she deals with the poignancy of Polish history is quite new. Her position is ninety degrees removed from that of Romanticism, in which language, fatherland and religion formed a three-headed angel in a country that didn't exist. Language was the fatherland, religion the footing.

From the Romantic period Szymborska eagerly cites a verse by Cyprian Kamil Norwid: 'When young, the artist may say that the earth is round like a ball, but when old, he must say it is flat at the poles.'

To this she adds: 'Forgive me, language, if I borrow poignant words from you and struggle to make them sound lighthearted.'

Language, fatherland, religion: Szymborska doesn't give a damn about them. She has seen where patriotism and ideology can lead. Her language is anything but a weapon for her. Rather it is 'something you just love, like an old scarf or patting a dog on the head or going your own way.'

She fills our glasses and makes one last toast.

Her poetry brought me to her long ago, long before the Nobel Prize, but now I have also seen and heard the many-sided laugh that resonates between the lines of her poetry. I kiss her on the cheek, which smells of fresh flowers and a hint of cigarette smoke. She waves goodbye as I go down the stairwell, then disappears again behind the enclosure of her language.

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At Warsaw University I meet young people in their twenties, boys and girls in clouds of Coco Chanel and Paco Rabanne, children of lucky bastards who are fanatic Eurocrats and self-assuredly express their opinions in five or six languages. A silver cross dangles from their necks. They are not afraid of the ghosts from the past or the paper tiger called Brussels. They talk about economy as if it were a recipe for borscht, and they can't wait to pay a call on the European institutions, with a boldness that is characteristically Polish.

'A new Polish lesson has begun,' wrote Ryszard Kapuściński in *Lapidarium*. 'The theme of the lesson is democracy. It's a difficult lesson that involves hard work, and it's strictly monitored to prevent cheating. That's why we get some fails. But the bell has rung and we're all sitting in the classroom.'

Lisa couldn't care less.

'Life is somewhere else,' she replies cynically when I ask how she is faring.

This is how I know her. No beating around the bush. We enter the northern district of Praga. Her husband, a taciturn Jew, is driving. Lisa is the remote descendant of an aristocratic family who organizes artistic salons like a twenty-first century Madame de Staël in her Jugendstil house on the right bank of the Vistula.

Karolina D. joins us. She is quite a bit younger but doesn't like being addressed with the familiar *ty*, probably because as an attractive Warsavian she is known to forty million Poles as a television presenter and can be admired via satellite as far away as Chicago. I address her from a polite distance with the formal *Pani*, 'Madam'.

Lisa shakes her head as she listens to the story of my search for the Polish culture. After a heated private exchange with Pani Presenter, she advises me to go and talk with the Polish emigrants living in Brussels, Paris and Berlin, but not with the Poles in Poland! *They* will be able to describe the state of the Polish culture better than all the idiots in this bloody country. How can you possibly find something here that doesn't exist? Lisa is all but mild towards her compatriots.

'Of course a few have stayed,' she confesses scornfully, as we enter the spacious sitting room, 'but they all huddle safely in their shells and seldom come out. Incidentally, anyone who has ever tried to make a name for himself here in Poland has sat on one of my sofas at one time or another.'

We sit ourselves down in the kitchen, where a young boy – I believe it was Lisa's son – who had inherited his father's reticence, was cooking an omelette.

Lisa asks what I want to drink. I say coffee, but she opens an expensive bottle of wine. Her house is unrivalled, a nineteenth-century drawing room replete with paintings, books bound in fine calf's leather and music instruments from the Renaissance. The kitchen is filled with Swedish furniture. The wine she pours was matured in Spanish Galicia.

'Under communism,' she declares, in one of her theatrical monologues, 'you had the phenomenon of *internal emigration*. Do you know what that is?'

She rattles on before I can reply.

'The internal emigrants were troublemakers, who for some reason didn't go abroad but who had such a subversive reputation with the political police that they had to live as exiles in an intellectual enclave within their own country. That is, try to survive.'

She places a dish laden with pastries in front of me and refills our glasses. Pani D. eats from the same plate as the boy.

'No time for breakfast,' she grins with a full mouth as she taps her watch. It's already past three o'clock.

'You still have those internal emigrants today,' Lisa continues, 'they're people who deep in their hearts still nurture the hope that one day something will change in this lousy country. That is, for the better. But they're gagged by the stupid media.'

'Well,' protests Pani D., who wants to save the honour of her medium, but she chokes on a mouthful of bread.

'Come on, that's the way it is,' whines Lisa, 'and you know it better than anyone. Because what do we get to see on that shit box of a television?'

'Yesterday there was a play by Witold Gombrowicz,' I volunteer, 'in a decent production by Jarocki.'

'Oh, Gombrowicz … not a bad word about Gombrowicz! No one would dare! But that's the exception to the rule. Most of the time all you see on the box is shit.' She counts on her fingers: 'One, sex. Two, violence. Three, advertisements.'

'Aren't you generalizing a bit?' asks Pani D.

'No,' replies Lisa curtly, 'that's the way it is. All those miserable intellectuals who are the real conscience of Poland, not that Vatican popism, you know, the *real* stuff … you don't see that on the damn box, do you?'

'And what about my programme?' argues Pani D. Every month she receives a few important guests in her studio.

'Oh, darling,' fawns Lisa. She leaps up from her chair, knocking over a wineglass in the process, embraces Pani D. and presses a kiss onto her lips. 'You try so very hard that you're exemplary for the whole country, but then aren't you the sweetest cherry on a bitter cake?'

'I allow myself to say you're wrong,' smirks the presenter, 'but on the other hand there is definitely a danger that commercial …'

'There, see what I mean?' cries Lisa, plunking herself down on her Swedish stool.

Her husband, slightly hidden away between the refrigerator and windowsill, mumbles that she shouldn't get so excited.

'If you look at everything,' Lisa continues, unperturbed, 'if you see the avalanche of capitalism that's inundating us – and they *had* predicted it, they had clearly predicted it, goddammit – you'd almost start thinking it was better under communism …'

Everyone in the kitchen except the boy, for whom communism was pre-history, bursts out laughing.

When she's stopped laughing, Lisa takes a big gulp of wine and continues: 'There's a grain of truth in what I'm saying. I'm acting like Lady Godiva, but I know what I'm talking about. The world was clear under communism: you were for it, and then you were a triple asshole who had the blood of your grandparents on your hands. Or you were against it, and then you were declared free as a bird, a Don Quixote, a wise fool who always carried a toothbrush in his pocket in case the blue bus of the *milicjai* plucked you from the street. *Has the time come? Is it now you've come to get me?* You know, Kafkaesque situations: pounding on the door, patent leather shoes on the doorstep, Sir, Madam, we've been given orders to take you with us for extensive questioning because you're guilty of subversive activities!'

She lights up a thin cigarette, inhales deeply and continues. 'While in reality all you did was say to a colleague once at work that Minister so-and-so was a bore or make illegal photocopies of, say, Gombrowicz … That was all it took. A clear world: on the one hand, this, and on the other, that. Either or. Left or right. Black or white. God or devil. Bitch or Bastard.'

'But you didn't see the intellectuals on television then either,' suggests Pani D., as she steals a cigarette from Lisa's packet and straightens her suit.

'For God's sake, no. Of course not. But they were widely respected, people listened to them, and if they disappeared behind bars for a few years, or if their blood relatives were eliminated – because often they didn't tackle the dissident but his loved ones, which was possibly even worse – well, then everyone *knew* it, people talked about it in the long queues at the shops,

in the sardine-tin busses we had then *and* at the many secret meetings. That, my dear writer,' she points the tip of her cigarette in my direction, 'I have witnessed with my own eyes.'

She doesn't need to convince me. I've seen it too. In Cracow at the end of the eighties. I was staying in a suburb of the city with a couple and their two children, in one of the smaller tenement flats. The man introduced me to the poetics of Cyprian Kamil Norwid, one of the great nineteenth-century poets, on whom he'd written his Master's thesis. During one of our nightly drinking sessions, in which we talked heavy philosophy, the man suddenly put his hand on my shoulder and whispered frantically: 'We must lower our voices because a policeman lives above us.'

We didn't lower our voices. We were lucky. The dreaded scenario was him in jail and me on an airplane heading towards the capitalistic paradise. One-way traffic. A clear world.

That same couple took me to a literary meeting, *Na głos* ('Aloud'), somewhere in a cellar near Wawel Castle. These meetings had begun on 14 December 1983, two years after martial law was declared, with Wisława Szymborska reading a controversial poem about pornography. *Na głos* later became a journal that appeared irregularly. One of the poets who was to perform during my visit – I don't remember his name, but he was undoubtedly an internal emigrant with a toothbrush in his pocket – was absent at the roll call because he'd been taken to the State Security Office in a shrouded limousine a few days earlier. To agents trained in breaking things: fingers, careers, families.

Lisa's excited monologue continues for some time, until Pani D. begins to yawn, the wine is finished and the dog, who had been sleeping on the radiator until then, begins to lick at his empty dish.

I thank them for the pleasant evening. I want to go downtown. Pani D. straightens her suit and disappears in an unnamed direction. Lisa's husband still has business to take care of, Lisa herself paces around on her little Italian boots. A short time later the three of us are sitting in the car heading downtown.

'Where exactly do you have to go?' asks the husband.

The inexhaustible Lisa interrupts us. 'Oh, take a look at that,' she proclaims theatrically, 'the most beautiful building in the whole city!'

The Palace of Culture looms up in front of us, a Stalinist-Gothic tower built during the 1950s. Every satellite state of the Soviet Union is adorned with such a gift from Moscow. Under communism, it symbolized brotherhood among men. Moscow has seven such buildings. Cinemas, conference halls, theatres and the Academy of Science are now housed in the Warsaw edition. In the vernacular it's called the Sugarloaf. There's a joke: what's the most beautiful place in Warsaw? The answer: the top of the Sugarloaf because at least there you can't see it.

'We used to call it Stalin's prick, you know,' confides Lisa.

Another good one.

'And you know what some people want to call it today?'

'Elzbieta,' hushes Lisa's husband, as he tears along the Warsaw boulevards, 'the gentleman doesn't need to know all that.'

'John Paul the Second's prick!'

She roars with laughter, chokes, lights up a cigarette and bursts out laughing again. Her husband too is chuckling behind the wheel.

I leave the car with hand-kisses, embraces and promises. I inhale deeply, rather relieved after that interminable ranting., and sniff up the smoky air of Warsaw on the eve of winter.

All night long, images of cakes compete with each other in my mind: the sugarloaf as phallus, a bitter Pope, bitter cops, bitch or bastard, Pani D.'s cherry, bright red like the tip of a lipstick …

Xxxxxxxxxx

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