

Złota Polska Jesień (Golden Polish Autumn)

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September is a delightful month. Summer is slowly bowing out, with autumn yet to make an entrance. Jesianą dni są ciepłe i ładne - autumn days are warm and nice. In towns and cities, the change is marked by the slow ebb of pavement tables and chairs and the return of the leafleteer to every street corner, while in the country the transformation is more subtle. Gradually leaves lose their sheen and slowly, as the trees start to shut down for the winter, they turn yellow, then orange and russet and finally brown before giving up entirely and drifting slowly earthwards, to collect in drifts and piles wherever they may lie undisturbed, homes for insects and rodents, hiding dead dogs and patches of mud.

It's a Thursday morning when I head out, intending to catch up with a friend, take a good walk in the forest and return home with plenty of fungi to turn into sauce for *naleśniki* or soup. The nature of mushroom picking is such that to get to the best you have to be up and out pretty early, so the day isn't that old as I board the 500, clutching a small cloth bag, empty except for a couple of sandwiches. Heading into town the bus is crowded until after we cross the river, the water brown and slow moving, the brick hypodermic of the palace of culture visible in the distance, its masonry orange in the weak morning sun. Most people get off at the Metro and make their way to other parts of the city. I stay on, take a free seat and watch the other passengers for something to do. At Arkadia a thin, middle-aged man gets on, dragging a small brown and white terrier on a long length of twine. He stands close to me, talking to the dog, who looks up occasionally. As we near the centre, the man leans over and asks the dog:

'Are we getting off?'

The dog looks up and its tail starts to wag.

'Getting off?' The tail wags harder.

'Are we going for a walk? Are we?' The dog lets out an excited yap: one of two



emissions from its small scrawny body. In a matter of seconds, the bus fills with the stench of eager, excited, wound-up canine fart. There is a brief interlude then, as the fumes spread, a mass flurry to open windows and cover faces with hands, newspapers or scarves. The owner neither notices nor cares; the dog looks secretly proud.

We pull up at the stop, the doors eventually open. Passengers alight as one, eyes watering. Great lungfuls of air are gasped, the smell of fumes and piss by Centralny infinitely better than the pong on the bus. The *pałac* clock tells me I'm late, so I hurry down the steps and through the underground maze that makes up the station. It is busy, even at this hour; masses of people travelling to all corners of Poland and beyond. Ticket queues snake along corridors lined with kiosks selling sweet buns or cigarettes, paperbacks or drinks. Trying to hurry I am jostled and hustled in my attempt to get quickly to the far end of the station, past the *Mrówka* kiosk, to the WKD ticket office. I buy a ticket and wander onto the platform. There are hardly any people here, waiting for a train out of the city. A couple of women with empty baskets and equally empty faces stand by the book stall. On a bench further down, two older men mumble and grumble at each other in the way alcoholics do, berating one another for a variety of things: taking their seat, touching a bag, trying to steal a drink. As I pass I see one clutching a book, *European employment law for journalists* and wonder how much, if any, he's read and whether something within is the cause of the incoherent argument.

It is chilly on the platform. No sun ever gets down this far, the trackside walls are too high. Only people and pigeons down here - both get where oil can't. On the wall someone has written in neat schoolchild hand: *Oskar to parówki*. I look down the tracks and see a light. A minute later the red, white and blue train screeches and grinds its way to a stop on the platform. With a shudder, the doors open and out pour the workers, ready for a day at the office or university, carrying briefcases, backpacks, shopping bags, hopes. There are no smiles, no sounds of conversation except for one man in a suit, trying to look important and bellowing into a tiny mobile phone held sideways in his hand, as if it will burn his ear should he put it there. Someone told me recently how to spot a Pole if you're in England - they're the ones screaming into mobiles on buses and trains. They must practice in Warsaw.

In two minutes the throng is gone, moving like a Roman phalanx up the exit ramp to disperse and go where they will. I hoist myself into the carriage, picking a place with a good window view. The seats are solid red plastic; the kind designed by people who know they will never sit on them. There is a loud ring, the doors

shudder closed and, with a lurch, we trundle silently out of the station. The sun is beginning to filter down through the blocks, wisps of mist still visible along the tracks. On the right the railway museum, a line of rusting black steam engines, a throwback to former times. We roll slowly, never gathering much speed, further out into the suburbs of Warsaw. Past houses with gardens now, not apartment blocks and flats. A flash of colour: a field of gladioli waiting to be picked, transported into town and sold to people who need a constant reminder of what nature is.

After twenty minutes my arse is numb from the plastic bench. We judder along, starting and stopping at every wayside halt. It is another twenty minutes before we get to where I'm to meet Marek, my sometime drinking buddy and source of local knowledge. He is there when I get off the train, blinking in the morning sunshine, smoking one of his foul smelling Spike cigarettes and reading last week's *Metro*. He looks up as I approach, the only passenger to alight here.

'Cześć,' he says, standing. His hand stretches out for the obligatory shake.

'How is it looking?' I ask, nodding towards the trees that surround the station. He smiles and beckons me with a dirty finger. We wander over to his beaten-up *Polonez* and there on the back seat, wedged in with an old coat: two baskets of mushrooms Marek has picked earlier that morning. We get in. He starts the car and, amid a cloud of blue-white smoke, heads down the road that leads away from the station. We drive for nearly fifteen minutes; down the small road and then onto a rutted track that divides two dense stretches of woodland - the forest proper. The track more suited to a four-by-four than this not-so-ancient bone-shaker. Occasionally Marek points out a tree he likes or a flower he knows, briefly outlining what it might cure or what illicit brew it could make. We exchange names, him supplying the Polish, me the English where I know it.

A wide place on the track appears and Marek decides to park. He stops the car, turns off the engine and out we get. This is the moment I love. The first smell - when the fumes from the car have dispersed - of the forest. The trees, the undergrowth, the mulch, the hummus, the decay. A light breeze blows through the canopy, hardly stirring the grass underneath. Sunlight slants through the trees, making little rays of light that will make it difficult to spot *borowiki*, the brown ones, the best ones. The silence surrounds us. Birds spooked by the noise of the car are silent. They remain so when, opening the boot, Marek takes out an empty basket and an evil-looking knife. I get my cloth bag from the back seat and produce a smaller, more practical blade from my coat pocket. Marek sniffs the

air, pretending he can smell fungi. Impressive until you find out, as I did some months ago, he has lived most of his adult life in one of Huta's grey blocks, working at a factory on the banks of the Wisła. Until it shed workers by the hundred, leaving Marek with nothing to fill his day except early morning fishing trips; forays into the forest; afternoon drinking sessions with his neighbours.

He grunts, pointing into the trees. 'Idziemy,' he says, as if to a favourite dog and off we go. Away from the track and into the dappled sunshine flickering across the forest floor. I feel like a real hunter-gatherer: stepping off the well-worn path of normality to find food I will later eat. My eyes immediately look down, start sweeping from left to right, round tree trunks, under bracken or bramble, into tufts of grass. Finding the first one is the hardest. After that you get used to the colours, the shapes, the locations. It isn't always plain sailing though, and I am sure I miss plenty as I tramp through the dew-moist grass. Marek is somewhere over to my left, head down, knife waving. We will spend much of the morning like this, apart. Each searching for his own reward. Later we'll compare our spoils with just a hint of competition. Even though it remains unspoken, the one with the most in the basket will be, on this occasion, the winner. I never mind, which is just as well as, being English, I never win. Brought up regarding mushrooms as small, white and tasteless, it was a real eye opener to find that Poles think of these as mere *pieczarki*, not even bona fide mushrooms. Now here I am, combing the forest floor for the real thing.

I walk slowly, eyes scanning every leaf, every brown shadow. When I find one, I turn it gently to check underneath. If it looks like a sponge, out comes the knife. Cut the stem close to the ground, don't pull it out completely - leave something for next year. Check the stem for worms or damage, brush the grass or leaf mould off the top, place it carefully in the bag. Where one is there are often others and a closer look uncovers several siblings. These too are cut carefully, checked, cleaned, placed in the bag. Every so often I find one with a thread of worm trails through it and the stem is cut off. If the rot has spread further the mushroom is discarded and the search continues. After an hour or so I have almost filled my cloth bag with *borowik*, *koźlarz*, *podgrzybek*. Pride of place are the dark chestnut-brown *borowiki*, perfect fried in butter. My mouth waters at the thought.

Moving round in a general circle, two hours of foraging finds us in a clearing. There we sit for a while; I eat my bread and cheese, Marek *kietbasa* and an onion. He takes alternate bites of bread and sausage, eats the onion like an apple. The sun is still out, but clouds are starting to gather, scudding across the sky. It is chilly when the sun hides behind them and we decide to start heading back, just

in case rain comes. We return the same way, but in a smaller arc; steadily searching, bending, cutting, brushing, adding. By the time we get to the road again it is starting to look darker, leaden clouds are building and the wind - so soft and warm earlier - now insistent and with a hard edge. A sign of a storm, Marek says, although I think the cloud too light for that.

We come out onto the track a good half kilometre from the car but can see it sitting there, waiting for our return. No other sign of human life. Not now, not earlier, not for the whole time we have been in the forest. As we get closer though, we can see something is not quite right with our motor. One side appears to be listing. A hundred metres from the car Marek lets out a curse, muttering under his breath and I see the cause. Someone has tampered with the car - to be precise, the offside wheel. Where the wheel should be there is now a short, thick plank and a short, squat log, precariously balanced but keeping the axle off the floor. Marek curses again and looks about. No sign of anyone. So who has been and taken the wheel? Why? More to the point, they've taken the nuts too. A quick search yields nothing. If they've thrown them into the grass we have no hope of finding them. But, as Marek says, there is no point standing and complaining, that won't help us. The wind is getting stronger and the clouds are building, beginning to look more threatening. Marek opens the boot, removes the rug he keeps as a boot tidy and takes out the spare wheel and jack. While I carefully get the jack into place and lift the car a little further, trying to keep it steady, Marek takes one nut off each wheel. Three on a wheel will get us back to the city where replacements can be found.

But I can't get the car high enough; the jack is sinking slowly into the soft ground. So Marek stands with his back to the wheel, bends his knees, puts his hands under the arch and lifts. Not much, but enough. I jiggle the wheel on and attach the nuts, tightening them as best I can. 'It'll do.' Marek says. I let it down and put the jack back in the boot. Marek throws the log at a tree, angry at a petty theft that could have been a major problem.

With the wheel back on, Marek wipes his hands on his jacket and lights one of his cigarettes. I wipe my hands on the grass and check my mushrooms. A good haul, there will be a feast tonight, I think. Maybe enough to dry a few, slowly and carefully in the coolest of ovens. Preparations for winter. It's coming too, the sky warns of that. The wind is stronger in the trees now, less of a whisper and more of a burgeoning roar.

'Come,' says Marek, 'It will rain soon; I'll take you back to the city.'

I breathe a secret sigh of relief. We get back into the car. A couple of attempts then the engine fires. We drive slowly back to the road. Overhead the sky is growing darker, clouds full of rain outnumber the patches of blue. In a field, a stork waits for a signal to send it further south. The changes in the seasons reflecting changes in the country as a whole. Everything moves on, while at the same time stays exactly the same. Nothing appears worse, but nothing gets better either. We drive on in silence. The car smells faintly of petrol and hummus. As we turn right at some traffic lights and onto Aleje Jerozolimskie, the first spots of rain hit the windscreen and make big wet circles in the dust. I pull my coat tighter around me. Marek lights another cigarette.