

# The Dreamers and the Panitents



KRZYSZTOF  
SPADŁO

**THE  
DREAMERS  
AND THE  
PANITENTS**

BY

KRZYSZTOF  
**SPADŁO**

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*To my children:*

*Bartek, Kuba and Zosia,  
May you always pursue your dreams!*

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## BEAST OF BURDEN

Today's July morning was the harbinger of a scorching day. The rays from the rising sun cut the air sharply like buoyant golden strings, and over the azure sky one couldn't spot even a shadow of the slightest cloud. The fiery sphere was climbing higher and higher over the horizon with each minute, and dealing its pleasant warmth, it reached with jaunty blaze the darkest nooks to offer the world a longed for joy of life.

The roofs of houses, the trees' leaves, bushes and sweeps of grass, showered in the morning dew, were glittering with thousands of tiny specs, giving out the impression of minute movement. One could be tricked into thinking that somebody, in a miraculous, even magical way, sprinkled the whole area with fine, starry glitter.

The forested terrain located on the city's outskirts was enveloped with thin mist. Milky wisps hovering just above the ground floated unhurriedly, wandering around shrubbery and boughs, as if wanting to hide their mysteries away from the busybodies' eyes.

Strzelce Opolskie, still immersed in sleep, was wrapped in all-embracing quiet. The only sign of life was the birds' morning chirp; although sometimes you could also hear the invisible wing carrying into the air the characteristic rattle of a rushed train, somewhere off afar.

Like any day, the church bells sounded at exactly five thirty, calling for the morning mass, and their sonorous peal resonated nobly across the whole environs. The city's streets were

slowly starting to vibrate with life. People hurried along in different directions to their everyday tasks and duties, a whirr of speeding cars gradually amplified an increasing haste.

Routinely at six, the silence of the prison walls was pierced by the scream of the alarm clock, waking up the convicts.

Here, in a hermetical world, each day was like a copy of itself. The pattern engraved by iron regulations created a monotonous reality. The reality of this world.

It was coming on 7.15 am.

On the prison's parking lot six yellow-green buses, the property of the penitentiary, stood ready to depart. In each, aside from the driver, were six armed guards and twenty eight convicts dressed in steel-gray uniforms. A moment later, an imposing steel entrance, suspended from above and slotted into tracks below, opened with a loud rasp. The noise of the splayed gates startled a flock of pigeons sitting on the nearby roof. Horror-struck birds sprung up in panic and, nervously flapping their wings, they circled the skies and glided towards the city.

The buses, one by one, slowly drove away, leaving behind a wistful fortress of redemption, and smoothly melted into the world across the other side of the wall. Some of the prisoners, as if they were tourists taking part in an exotic excursion, devoured with their eyes a landscape that was gradually changing over the course of the ride. Others, however, with longer "tenure" than their inmates, were watching with calm, impassive eyes, at the bottom of which lurked sadness and a longing for freedom.

The motorcade split up at the next crossroad. The first four vehicles went straight ahead, and the two remaining ones took right, and having disappeared behind the turning, they scudded down the outskirts of Strzelce Opolskie. Heading towards Krapkowice, after a few minutes of driving, the signs marking up the city borders flew by. Now the asphalt ribbon of the highway coiled up against scenic fields and woods, immersed



## MORPHEUS' STAIN

January 4 (Saturday)

*It's hard to believe the new year's begun. The sounds of the New Year's party are still echoing in my ears. It's good that at least once in awhile a man can forget about everything. Tomorrow's the last short day of sweet laziness, and from Monday – back to work!*

*I can only cherish the hope that this year will actually be better than the previous one, and that finally something will change in my gray, monotonous life. Truth be told, if I had a dash of resolution and courage, I wouldn't count on fate's whim, but grab life by the horns.*

January 6 (Monday)

*I've taken the same bus route to work for years and every morning I've hummed in my mind the lyrics of Janerka's old hit: "to get up and work, and have, can't really do it, don't really want it". Out of pure curiosity, I watched people's faces today, and unfortunately, I didn't see anyone that appeared happy. Grim faces, noses red from the morning cold and de-*

*jected looks, in a word: despair. And I, another perfect element, fitting this cheap jigsaw puzzle.*

*When I think that tomorrow I'll stand again between the counter and the shelves full of car parts, I want to crawl out of my skin. I'm wasting my life in this mercantile business, if that store were mine at least...Or if I ran some sort of business, maybe then my existence would have some spark. It's maddening. Everything is contained in a microcircle – work, home, sleep, work, home, sleep, non stop.*

*I used to have ambitions and will, but for the past dozen years, since I tied the knot, all the plans have faded away, then started smoldering and eventually burned out for good. I'm not a rabble-rouser, I've always taken the path of least resistance and have been afraid to take a risk. Well, I guess I believed too much in things that turned out to be evanescent. I thought that family married life, kids and so on would give a man some sort of grand satisfaction, but actually that's bullshit. It's just a treadmill. Family life is overrated.*

*I got snared in my own trap.*

*I know perfectly that there is no such thing as a dead end. Every problem has its solution. For instance, Adam – he ditched everything and started over. Now the guy's somewhere far away, leading quite a peaceful life, and I think he's not going to make the same mistake again. Was it a good decision? It's not for me to judge his choices. He left a wife, two teenage kids, a large apartment, all his life's savings and cut loose, just carrying a bag of his own clothes and a sweet sense of carelessness. I guess I envy him the courage.*

January 10 (Friday)

*Today after work I hit the bar as usual. My spouse doesn't like when I come back home reeking of hops. As a matter of fact, I don't give a fuck what she likes or doesn't like, I have long stopped caring about what pleases her. I am, after all, a thirty-nine year old man, goddamn it, and no one will lead me by the nose like a schoolboy. If I feel like something, I'll do it and that's that. The worst part is that she makes such a huge deal out of it. She gets in her babble mode and acts like her whole world has fallen apart. Sometimes I wonder if other guys have similar problems, or is it just me wading in this shit.*

*A man spends ten hours working his ass off, toils like an ox to earn a dime and he can't even spend it?! Maybe it would be different if I came back home totally wasted, behaved like a savage, kept everyone under my thumb – but I only had two beers! I've never gone there, but it seems like I should put her in her place every now and then. Maybe then she'd behave like a woman should.*

January 15 (Wednesday)

*I can't remember exactly who came up with the out-fucking-standing nickname for our boss, but Lardy fits him like a square peg in a round hole. The guy is barely a hundred and thirty pounds and overall he looks like a beanpole. He's so slight and dried out that even if I (not exactly Sylvester S. or Arnold S.) took a good swing and boxed him once, I'd probably kill him.*

*Probably one day I will do it, when I stop giving a crap about anything.*

## IN THY NAME

In Stefan Bremel's original plans the addition was to serve as a garage, but thirteen years ago, exactly a year after it'd been build, a tragedy happened. Actually, maybe it was better that way? Marianna Bremel had been ill for many, many years, life hadn't skimped her anguish and instead of joy offered suffering. Finally, they both knew that sooner or later it would have to happen. A malignant tumor slowly devoured Mrs. Bremel's body from the inside, who every evening probably prayed ardently to God to take her soul painlessly away. Death came suddenly one October night. It sneaked into their house like a thief and kidnapped into its arms Stefan's fifty-year-old life partner. Things seemed pointless since then, and the garage – even more so.

It was odd, but you didn't even think what a sacrifice it was to consciously devote yourself to work. Bremel realized that but it was too late. How many times did his late spouse wait for him with a warm lunch, while he was engrossed in his turbines and all that junk at the power plant? How many unrealized vacations, weekends at work were there in his life? How many free afternoons did he spend bent over some written sheets of paper trying to figure out a problem that had nothing to do with his private life? So much had escaped them because of his work. Work that also fulfilled him and was his passion.

The first couple of years after her death were really tough. He couldn't handle the loneliness, couldn't take care of himself, he ate poorly and overworked himself. Actually, he wasn't interested in anything but work and a few hours of sleep. That was all he needed.

His health started to deteriorate and problems came right after he reached the retirement age. He knew it meant a definite end to his professional career, the end of work. Retirement was like an invisible thorn thrust right into his ailing heart.

What was supposed to be a well-deserved rest, an award for all the years devoted to work, was basically nothing more but vast emptiness. He couldn't comprehend how you could sit idly and wait for God knows what. It was then that he adapted the addition, which was supposed to be a garage, into his workshop. Right now he didn't know yet what he'd be doing, but he had to do something. Anything. When day after day was dreadfully gray, and each morning and dusk tasted of harsh bitterness, you had to do something so as not to go insane.

\*

After a few weeks of retirement stagnation, he finally made a decision. At first the idea seemed utterly crazy, but on the other hand, he actually had nothing to lose. Nothing but time and money. As for the cash, he couldn't make good use out of it anyway, as his needs were downright minimal. Besides, he concluded that a continuation of the research, which during his professional work remained in the sphere of idle discussions and empty lab chatter, would make a pretty good occupa-

tion for such an old maniac as himself. Well, it was true that having at your disposal professional equipment and the help of a couple of sharp heads were completely different than a small, empty space and a lot of zeal.

It was a weird thing, conspiracy theory enthusiasts would surely find some more or less rational explanation, but the same day when he decided to seriously get down to curbing the energy, he was given a partner. Maybe he didn't have some great college diploma but he was someone who could staunchly wait for effects, and with time he started understanding perfectly what was being said to him. He was a dog. A small, tanned mutt with a friendly snout, short paws and hair. Stefan got him as a gift from his neighbor living on the other side of the street. It was hard to say if it really was a gift or a way of getting rid of an inconvenient problem. Michal's own female dog whose only job was to guard the household during her owners' absence had seven puppies out of the blue. Maybe it really was a present. The neighbors knew after all that Stefan Bremel had lived alone for years, and giving him a puppy seemed like a nice thing to do. Yes, that was nice, there was no doubt about it. Maybe at first he was a little surprised, but he was happy. It turned out that he could take better care of the creature than himself. Fido, as this was the pet's name, had his own bowl, a nook to sleep in, and the best food that a dog could dream of. At least the best food an ordinary, tanned mutt could dream of.

Thanks to Fido's antics and clumsiness, their days gained some spark. A heart-felt smile appeared on Bremel's face more and more often. Though the dog did make quite a mess from time time to time, when he got entangled in a web of wires crawling like worms across the extension house's floor or when he got a ball, and pretending to bark menacingly, he chased after it all over the place. Although he knocked over all kinds of equipment he encountered, he never got rebuked by his owner.

\*

## A BOY WITH A CAP

It's Friday today. That atrocity happened on Wednesday, and since then I haven't been able to control the shivering of my hands. Last night I was haunted by nightmares. What insanity, something like that has happened to me for the first time in my forty-year life. I can't explain this to myself, if I tried telling my wife what I've experienced, she'd look at me with disbelief and conclude furiously that I was either trying to scare her or I was taking some stuff, and going crazy.

I won't tell anyone.

Never.

All I want is to forget one thing – about a boy with a cap.

It was a late Wednesday afternoon. The October sun leaned towards the west, a bloody glow painted across the sky, and, as usual at this time, the center swelled with congestion.

I'm not a short-tempered guy, it's hard to phase me, but there are certain situations when quite groundlessly, I experience an inner frenzy. One of them is exactly driving through traffic. When I wade imprisoned in a line of vehicles, which painfully push ahead according to the lights' cycle, I'm starting to rave.

That's what happened on Wednesday.

I know that my impatient tapping against the steering wheel won't change anything, that glancing ahead and wondering: “why, the hell, aren't they moving?!” is futile, that all those

swearwords said in a half-whisper won't work like miraculous spells letting me dash freely ahead.

You have to do your waiting.

So I was stuck in that nightmarish line, some music seeped from the loudspeakers, and my thoughts glided. I was trying to focus on something more sublime and forget that I was moving at the pace of a funeral procession. The setting sun reflected in the rear-view mirrors, at times, when I tilted my head too much to the left, the light's reflexes burned my pupils with a scarlet ardor.

I scanned all those sad buildings, billboards devoid of character, weary faces of the passersby on the sidewalk. Some people seemed as if only their bodies had remained there, in this disheartening world. They resembled moving shells, mannequins deprived of awareness and abandoned by souls.

I like watching people, sometimes you can notice many striking things.

A green Golf right in front of me rolled ahead slowly. Instantaneously, I shifted to the first gear and followed it. I don't know how much we'd managed to cover – maybe twenty yards? Not more.

At least that.

We crawled ahead in stop-and-go.

After awhile, I managed to pick up a reasonable speed. Fewer stopovers, more driving. The lights before the overpass were already within my sight. I was doing OK.

The red digits of the electronic clock on the dashboard showed 5:53 pm.

By 5:58 it was already perfect. The pedestrian crossing, the lights above the road and only a few cars in front of me.

Great!



A pleasant feeling when you regain good spirits.

I looked to the left. I had to glance over as a vivid green light of a large ad in the shape of glasses was screaming for attention. It was located exactly on the corner of the building where the optician's was.

“Let's get going.

It's about time!”.

I peeped to the right. There was a boy on the sidewalk. He was wearing dark jeans, a purple fleece zipped to his chin, and a baseball cap pushed almost over his eyes. He couldn't have been more than eleven. Slight, thin, stooped and hunched, as if he were cold. His hands deep in his pockets, and that peculiar cap. Cherry-red with some emblem in the center. Probably a little too big. At least it seemed that way.

That youngster drew my attention for a short while.

He intrigued me.

I even know why. It's not how he was dressed, there wasn't anything unusual in his clothes, anyway, he looked like a million kids his age. He struck me because I have a son who could have been his peer. For a second, I wondered if such a kid should be roaming the streets on his own. Maybe I am oversensitive but I believe that eleven-year-olds are still feather-brained, besides today the lonely wanders of such striplings can't be safe. Anyway, you hear all that terrible news. For a fraction of a second I thought the boy was looking at me in the corner of his eye. He made a slight gesture, as if shaking his head, he didn't even slow down, walking in steady paces ahead.

We were both going in the same direction.

Suddenly, I heard a loud sound of the horn behind me, a driver of a burgundy truck almost riding my taillights was even more in a hurry than I was. He rushed me by flickering his lights.

## EYES

*You have only one pair of eyes –*  
a popular saying.

My issues with eyes started around four years ago. Out of nowhere, some subdermal crap appeared on my right upper eyelid. There was also a little bit of swelling. Touching it, I could feel a slight lump under my fingertips. Actually, it didn't bug me at all, it didn't irk me, didn't hurt... in a word, everything seemed harmless enough to let me ignore the problem. I can't remember now how long I'd had that defect but at least half a year!

Back then, I even had a few laughs about that swelling. First, I didn't pay any special attention to it, but with time I noticed that the people I talked with noticed my tumid eyelid after awhile and asked the same question all over again:

– What happened to your eye?

I even caught myself waiting for those words when I spoke to someone. It was a shame I didn't measure the time after which the question was asked, at least I'd know whose curiosity was the strongest.

It's quite possible that I'd have this thing on my eye til now if other symptoms hadn't showed up. Overnight, the THING started reminding me of its existence. I'd wake up in the morning and have problems opening my eyelid, my lashes alongside the lid were stuck together with a little caked, oily, stringy mass the color of rotten yellow. This also went for awhile, until I finally decided that it was about time to visit the optician's. I hate going to the outpatient clinic. I treat it as punishment. To make it worse, they have those asinine procedures there, it's a waste of breath. First, you go to the GP. You register, stand in lines and lose half a day to get a referral to the specialist. Then another show. You register and hear that the closest date is, for instance, Thursday next week, 11.30. Well, what can you do. Play along, that's all.

It was my turn. The doctor touched that THING, watched it and asked how long I'd been walking around with it, nodded her head with pity and wrote a referral for a procedure. Then she treated me to a lecture about neglecting your own health, which was rather in a bad taste, and summed it up with the popular saying: you have only one pair of eyes. On that occasion, she checked my eyesight. And then it turned out I needed glasses. She wrote out a prescription. I won't lie, it got to me a little bit.

I shoved the subject of glasses under the pile of things to do – first, the procedure.

I visited the hospital's ophthalmic ward. A doctor of the posture and appearance of a butcher had a look at the referral.

– Ha! We have a “goldfish” – he seemed amused. – Wait in the hall, please. We'll get rid of it in fifteen minutes.

I sat by the wall, crossed my legs and wondered what the hell he meant by a “goldfish”.

They sat me in a large armchair. The back of it reclined almost all the way down, putting me in a nearly lying position. Three people bustled around me. They put something underneath my chin, set some plastic foil screen, which dropped on my neck

## SMASH HIT!

A vast complex of oblong ground floor buildings in the city's suburbs was surrounded by perfectly trimmed sheets of wavy metal; only on the seams could you see the glisten of the nickel-plated clinches' semicircular heads. The fence itself was painted a matte blue. Along the fencing ran a row of soaring street lamps, which each evening burned with a bright yellow light.

It was coming up on noon. The April sun smiled with a glaring shine against the impeccably azure sky. A fragrance of wonderful freshness hovered in the air. The bushes, shrubs and trees gushed out cascades of delightful green. The spring wonder was unraveling.

A black Citroen C5 glided down the wisp of an asphalt road from the north. The car stopped at a parking lot in front of blue fencing. After awhile, three men dressed in well-cut suits started towards the wide gate. They represented the biggest chain of supermarkets in Poland. A task rested on their shoulders to find a suitable trade partner and conclude with them a profitable cooperation agreement. It was them who on behalf of the company ran Serious Business, which brought Serious Money.

The men had already had an opportunity to meet the company's owner awhile before, but their previous meetings had taken place in secluded law offices. The trade agreement had been signed a few weeks before, the first shipments had reached the seven most strategic sales points, the promotion campaign was

underway, and the goods were selling themselves. Today's visit was a pure formality, almost a courtesy. Appropriately, such behavior was a seed, which could yield crop if it came to further negotiations in the future. And since the demand for the assortment was beyond their wildest dreams, such a perspective loomed on the business horizon. The gentlemen in suits were outstanding experts in their trade. They were characterized by crystal professionalism and they made up an unbeatable team. Their visit today was aimed at getting exactly one piece of information, they expected an answer to one or two questions – if they could count on a delivery increase, if so, how serious would it be, estimating in per cents against the current agreement.

The conversation with the company's owner was of a casual and friendly nature. The visitors had a cup of coffee, the one driving refused, but the rest made a toast with a glass of premium cognac. Actually, they weren't interested in the production process, but the circumstances required that they have a look at the plant's presentation and listen to a few words.

They had to admit, the company being in the hands of one man was huge. They paced slowly between the rows of buildings.

It was so warm outside that they took off their jackets.

– The whole process starts in this spot – an older, gray-haired man said, pointing to a building with the sign INCUBATORS.  
– Let me explain briefly. Well, over there we have a colony of worms which offer us their delicate fiber. Without going too much into detail, the process is almost identical to the one with silkworms. I'm sure you've heard about them... – he looked at them with a smile. – The difference is that our insect survives and works in the most spartan conditions. We, however, took a step further and created an artificial environment, almost a perfect one, to achieve the optimum efficiency and free breeding. It's ensured by appropriate temperature, lighting, a certain humidity and a limitless access to food. These creatures are, let me say, very intelligent, if you can claim that about worms – he laughed. – Just imagine, gentlemen, that they regulate the size

## THE BLEAK CHAIN

*I'm stuck in the gray inertia and have no disillusionment,  
I have no joy nor peace.*

*I'm stuck in the gray inertia of my own existence  
and I don't know what's better: to dream or to die?*

In the darkness of the forest you could see wild, glistening eyes lurking here and there. Watchful and cautious, observing with curiosity what was happening in a large clearing, and at the same time ready to flee in an instant.

The impenetrable blackness of the sky was pierced by thousands of shimmering stars. Above the thicket of the woods, the moon's silver disc hung gazing at the world with a brilliant shine.

Twelve fires burned on the clearing arranged in an almost perfect circle. The yellow tongues of the fire sizzled in its hot dance, digesting the red hot wood. In the middle of the fiery circle stood a tall and proud effigy of Svetovid. At its feet but at a safe distance, there were four rectangular stakes elaborately arranged from thick, dry logs. Four stakes, one for each of the four faces of the worshiped god.

Around the blazing ring stood people dressed in primitive clothing. Children, women, boys and girls, men, the elders...

To a man, they looked with a nearly hypnotized stare at the place of their cult. The glow of the burning fire danced on their faces, painting restless shadows on them. The wind gently brushed the tree tops. Suddenly, the night's silence was shattered by a rhythmic beat. Bum-bum, bum-bum, bum-bum... Instantaneously you could hear a panic-stricken gallop resounding in different places of the nearby thicket. Frightened animals fled for their life. The sound was coming ominously closer and closer from the north. It droned in the rhythm of a heartbeat, calmly and steadily, it dictated the pace, ushering you into a trance. After awhile, the standing people began to move their heads in its rhythm, each giving out a glottal murmur.

Five silhouettes loomed in the dark. The two in front were carrying lit torches, the two at the back had tubes hanging across their necks; they held them up with their left hands, and beat them with their right hands wielding hewed sticks. The figure in the middle had long, snow-white hair reaching its elbows, covering its face and shoulders. In outreached hands, it held a round kettle. The cortege approached in slow steps. The gathered crowd parted slightly to make way for them. The five-people retinue went past the fiery circle and stopped. The figure holding the pot lifted it to the height of its face, mumbled something, quickly moving its lips, after which it straightened its arms and raised the item over its head. The crowd responded with a long, mad scream to that gesture.

Two strapping men dragged behind them a makeshift barrow on which a man was lying. His pale face was still conscious but death's breath was painted on it. One more day, maybe two. He'd been struggling with the inevitable for a long time, but there it was. There it was, the moment when the full moon flared up. The men set his body on one of the stakes. Here, in the light of the fire, you could see that the clothing at his stomach's height was soaked with dried up blood. He was still alive, breathing, and when he understood that he was lying at the feet of his God, joy sparkled in his eyes.

Three other people started from the crowd. A man and a woman were leading, upholding a stooped old lady by her arms. They helped her lie down.

A few-year old kid headed towards the circle's heart from the right side. He flung his right hip, dragging his stiff leg behind. One of the women followed him with eyes full of tears, and a man standing right behind her grabbed her tightly by her shoulder. The muscles on his face pulsated anxiously, tensing up his jaw.

The limping boy looked round his shoulder and cast them a cheerful look. He approached another stake and lay in it on his back.

The last spot was for the old man. He still stood with the rest who surrounded the circle. He took a step. A man next to him wanted to aid him and grabbed him by his arm. The old man halted, stared him down menacingly, slapped his hand around to show that he wished no help, and with a proudly raised head, he started ahead.

When all four were lying on the wooden stakes, the ritual commenced. The figure with the kettle stood in one place, while the people who had arrived with it arranged themselves, each one in front of Svetovid's different face. They turned their backs at the statue, took a few steps ahead, turned right and beating the tubes rhythmically, started making a circle in their time. The crowd outside the fires budged in the same rhythm, but in the opposite direction. Each person present gave out a drawling murmur.

The long-haired personage came up those lying down, scooped the brew with a little bowl from the kettle and passed it to their lips. At the same time, it bent over them and whispered something. Now the lying people could clearly see the mysterious face. It was a woman. An old woman. The furrows of her wrinkles ploughed her face, and she had a rugged, irregular scar over her right eyebrow. A slash running from her temple til the middle of her forehead.



## THE REBELS

– The express train from Kudowa to Cracow, the estimated time of arrival 8.20 pm, will be delayed by around thirty minutes – the nasal voice of a woman, devoid of any emotions, flowed from the station speakers. It sounded the same at every train station.

A few people frozen to the marrow waiting on the Prudnicki platform scurried unhappily towards the waiting room. Some man cursed racily. What else could they have expected? On November 1 all means of transport ran late. Not only was All Souls' Day once a year, not only did whole masses of people cover Poland up and down to pay respects to their late family members, PKP<sup>5</sup> had to treat them to the surprise of delays.

During the day the weather wasn't too bad. True, it was windy – and how – but the November sun shone and nothing indicated that around six pm it would start snowing fine fluff. The weather's parabola could really play tricks. Completely unprepared for it, the atmosphere let snowflakes fall to the ground, but the moment they touched it, it immediately transformed them into raindrops. Within not even half an hour the landscape was coated with a gown of moist melancholy. Actually, you couldn't really imagine that day would look any different.

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<sup>5</sup> PKP – Polish State Railways [trans. note]

It had to be miserable, gray and depressing to emphasize the spiritual ambiance with grief and reflection.

The gloomy dusk wonderfully enhanced the scarlet glow hovering above the cemetery. You could perfectly see the halo of thousands of candles from the station and smell the tangles of paraffin smoke rising into the sky. Although... maybe it wasn't just smoke? Fog thickening with every moment accompanied it.

– The express train from Kudowa to Cracow, the estimated time of arrival 8.20 pm, will be delayed by around forty five minutes. We apologize to the passengers and must inform you that the length of the delay may change – the woman with a clip on her nose, hidden somewhere in the building's walls, passed again the bad news to the passengers. A few people got up from their seats and headed for the exit, taking out packs of cigarettes from their pockets and messenger bags.

Each minute the mist was becoming more and more dense. The night and the white curtain were bleaching the world of colors, and the train station slowly started to resemble a god-forsaken corner.

For the ones who used the railways only to get from one place to another, the sound of the braking wheels from an unannounced train wasn't a sound you paid attention to. But for the ones on duty, the traffic orderly and the station personnel something like that was truly astonishing.

– What the hell! – a middle-aged man wearing a railman's uniform said and jumped up from his chair. He looked out on the platform from the staff room.

– Did they announce anything? – he asked dumbfounded, standing in the doorway. Two women sitting inside looked at each other and shrugged in silence.

– I can't see anything – he continued, not paying attention to the lack of response to his previous question. – Did you hear

what I heard? Baska, get through to Nysa, maybe they had a mix-up?

He went outside and headed down the platform in slow steps. He was straining his eyes, but in that fog there was no way he could possibly see anything, even the lights of the station's lamps needed effort to pierce the matte curtain. All that was even stranger as he was under the impression he could hear the heavy gasp of an engine, but he couldn't pinpoint which direction the familiar sound was coming from.

– So, what did they say? – he asked, leaning in the doorway.

– Nothing was coming.

– And Nowy Swietow?

– The same.

– Come with me on the platform – he nodded towards the woman. – Can you hear?

– Hear what?

– The engine. Listen carefully...

She raised her eyebrows and replied after a short while:

– It's cold. I hear nothing.

The railman looked her in the eye and waved his hand, as if he wanted to ask her with that gesture if she was at least sure she was alive. They both got back to the staff room.

The locomotive's lungs panted, spitting clouds of smoke from its pharynx. Three wooden cars with open doors stood behind the iron horse with some people sitting inside. It was true, the machine's sound seemed sort of absent. That mini-train in general looked very suspicious, taking into account that it stood on the track which practically hadn't been used for years and actually led to nowhere. The tracks were covered with a thick layer of rust, the ground between the sleepers was overgrown with thicket whose rotting arms entwined the moldy wood.

## THE DIGGERS

Kerm and Birdy were real friends. Friends with a capital F. Maybe they didn't even realize it but whoever watched them had no doubts about it. That invisible, sensual and spiritual bond between them was powerful. Probably their attachment was also influenced by the fact that they were both only childs. They were also connected otherwise – they were born the same year in the same hospital, their parents were good friends and neighbors. They lived in the same block of flats in the same gray district, in an equally boring and drowsy town. As newborns, Kerm and Birdy ended up in the same nursery, then kindergarten, primary school – the same class, adjacent desks and finally high school – once again: the same class and adjacent desks. Everything duplicated on the huge reel of the giant photocopier of life. Even passions.

Since the early days the boys had a common hobby – digging in sand. As toddlers they were active in the sandpit at the neighborhood's playground. Shovels and sand. The moms sat on the benches in a clone's shade and chewed the fat while the little ones kept drilling. Dirty, smeared, with sand under their fingernails, in their hair, but how much joy was it when they came across an old, rusty bottle cap! During the first years of primary school Kerm and Birdy kept digging but in a different sort of way (still always together). On the other side of the street a new block was being built, new family nests that were supposed to be finished in the vague future. In the afternoons, when the workers would leave the construction site, almost all

the boys from the neighborhood would converge – like voracious locusts to a maize field. They played cowboys and indians, hide and seek, tag, the more bored ones thought of practical jokes to make the life of the workers a misery. One time a steam shovel came and a huge ditch was formed during the day where the sewer system was supposed to run. To the construction workers' surprise, the excavation was perfectly filled in the next day. The foreman was said to get so furious he threw his helmet to the ground so hard it cracked in half. Then someone from the co-op came up with the idea to get the kids a metal carousel on the playground. A resolute team showed up, brought a large carousel, dug a hole, set it and left. In the evening Kerm, Birdy and a few other smart-asses got down to work. In the morning the new facility was uselessly laid on one side. The co-op people attempted fixing it three times, and the boys repeated their operation three times. There was no fourth try. The carousel went two blocks further and it's been there til that day.

Kerm and Birdy had other sand interests, as well. They kept looking and digging in order to find something, didn't matter what, some relic, as long as it belonged to the past. The juvenile imagination suggested dreams of discovering the unknown, of hidden away treasures, of chests filled with gold, of jugs full of priceless coins.

In their teenage years, the boys moved with their digging to a forest behind the estate. But it wasn't the same! Now it was no amateurism! Their professionalism relied to a large extent on them using actual firefighters' shovels! Before they managed to get them, they had collected cans, cardboard and empty bottles for over a month, which they later exchanged for hard cash at a scrapyard. They spent it on the obvious purchase in a sporting goods store.

Their idea of digging in the forest was a peculiar one. Group-packs were formed in the neighborhood, some shot hoops, some collected stamps, others glued models, and there were those building dugouts in the forest. The gang's cult place of meetings. Masked, well camouflaged, surrounded with mystery

## THE LUCKY MAN

After three weeks of carefree bliss I ended up in my office again, in the same leather armchair, at the same familiar oak desk. Frankly speaking, I didn't have it in me to spend that day working. Damn it, I employ teams of people, don't I, so I should be able to get them to deal with all the issues. It should be enough that I focus on the organization and make some decision from time to time.

I didn't even peep in the office. The employees knew I was in, and I wasn't going to watch them polish their extemporizing just because I was there. I'm no fool, I wasn't born yesterday. I know what things look like.

Mariola, the head of the entire office and my trusty secretary in one (to be honest, my most reliable assistant), brewed me some coffee and brought the monthly report. I've been working with her for several years, she's managed to get to know me quite well. Though our professional relationships aren't as formal, we still refer to each other "Sir" and "Mrs". Sometimes I feel she has all the information about me there is, and more, she may know me better than I know myself.

– I guess you'll be very busy today, sir – she said.

– I guess so – I said. – Don't put any calls through, please.

– Of course – she replied. – That's understandable.

I saw the gray clock on the wall slice away the passing minutes. With every moment I had a more overwhelming feeling it did-

n't make any sense. Maybe it used to, about twenty years ago when I was starting to build my empire, but not now... Now I was reaching the conclusion that all those years were like a sprint. I heard the firing of the start and I sped ahead. A chase for a better tomorrow, for a more comfortable life. True, I managed, but the question is – at what cost? Today I'm quite sure that I've lost too much for one lifetime. I do have money, a prosperous company, a new car, a large house, an old dacha by Mazurian lakes, so what? What's there to be happy about? One day I'll go in the dirt, anyway. There's always been only work, work, and more work, once in awhile a vacation in exotic countries. Vacation? What kind of relaxation is it when you can't stop thinking about business? How many times have I gone for a walk with my wife, she wanting to talk about anything, about life, art, new furniture, and what did I do? Well... Forever planning how to invest, where to accrue wealth, what to buy, how to limit the expenses. And so on, and so forth. How many evenings have I spent simply sitting in front of a TV or under a tree in the yard? Without exaggeration I would be able to count those moments on two hands. Willing and ready to act 24/7. How many days can you go on like this? Finally, it caught up with me. Bad moods, pressure, heart palpitations and a whole bag of pills. The worst part was that I couldn't slow down.

If I were a reasonable man, if I could afford to think that no money can buy health, I would have slowed down. After all, every now and then I heard that this or that guy ended up in the hospital. Their ticker couldn't handle it, the stress, stomach ulcers or some other nasty things. I simply assumed that it couldn't possibly concern me. I thought that anyone employed by someone else was a loser, a leech without a speck of imagination. I viewed them with disdain, evaluating their needs as minimal. What could they possibly need? A woman, vodka and slacking? Eight hours at work and home. Passions, hobbies? – that was a waste of time for me. What mattered was fruitful action. Cash. Climbing the social ladder, satisfying material needs and first of all, some sort of power. My aims revolved around those subjects.