A Polish Affair – Chapter 1

Caitlin was serious and studious. Throughout her time at school she was most often to be seen hurrying between classes with a pile of dictionaries a mile high and an intent frown etched across her features. Every morning, with a resigned shake of the head, her mother would wonder if it was really necessary for her to carry quite so many dictionaries about with her: Latin, English, French, German... a vast store of words to be studied and patterns to be deciphered... detective trails twisting and turning ever onwards. Dictionaries reassured Caitlin. One could never get lost with a dictionary in one’s bag. They anchored her resolutely to the ground with their solid weight. Caitlin was clever at languages, no doubt, but she remained firmly rooted to English soil.

At university, she pursued languages, going up to Cambridge to study French and German and travelling assiduously back and forth across the Channel with her nose buried in vocabulary books. During those years, however, she could never quite pull the veil back between herself and the countries whose histories she knew so intricately and whose contours she had crisscrossed by bus, train and car. She simply could not dispel the fact that they were the object of her studies and she had always taken her studies rather seriously – too seriously, in fact, to become fully absorbed in the countries themselves, relinquishing verb tables and listening exercises and simply feeling the rhythm of the land, its smell and touch.

*“Even if I did speak Irish, I’d always be considered an outsider here, wouldn’t I? I may learn the password but the language of the tribe will always elude me, won’t it? The private core will always be... hermetic, won’t it?”* A line from a play she had studied at school often echoed in Caitlin’s mind, uttered by Lieutenant Yolland, an English soldier fallen head over heels for Máire, an Irish maiden, despite not speaking a word of her language. Caitlin would often think wistfully of this line, wondering whether she was doomed forever to pursue the elusive keys to foreign lands. But then, quite unexpectedly, she began an affair with another “tribe” and realised, contrary to the despairing Englishman, that love and friendship were the only possible means to accessing its “private core”, even if one had not yet memorized its verb tables.

Dorota became Caitlin’s best friend. As their university mates stumbled out on high heels, Caitlin and Dotka (as she was affectionately known to English friends) stayed in, mulling over their vastly different national heritages and wondering over how they could still feel so strangely close. Caitlin listened intently to Dotka’s (mostly second-hand) memories of the long years of Communist Poland during which everyone had driven the same boxy red Fiat, referred to affectionately as the “Maluch”, and for which you had to wait at least two years unless, that is, you came into favour with certain government officials. Together, the girls watched the harrowing scenes of *The Interrogation* (*Przesłuchanie*)and then began to make their way steadily through *Dekalog*, snacking on the store of Polish food that Dotka transported every term from Katowice to Cambridge. Caitlin’s iPod soon filled with Myslovitz (who, like Dorota, came from Upper Silesia) and Akurat.

Alongside Dotka, there was, of course, Janusz, a sudden, stubborn presence in Caitlin’s life. After much hesitation she agreed to date him and, in slight consternation, found her interests, affections and loyalties becoming inextricably tied to a country she had never visited and a language she could not speak. Janusz was dark and taciturn. As his friends commented, he had “the whole Eastern European thing going on.” When asked to specify what this “Eastern European thing” might be, however, they could never quite define it but, at all costs, it seemed to be rather a positive trait. Janusz’s interests were what Caitlin’s mother described as “heavy”. Within a few weeks, Caitlin had been introduced to the works of Witold Gombrowicz and Wisława Szymborska, had watched *Day of the Wacko* (*Dzien Swira*), which Janusz falsely advertised as a “sort of Polish version of *Four Weddings and a Funeral*” and been to see *Our Class* (*Nasza Klasa*) at the National Theatre. When the curtain fell, Caitlin had turned to see Janusz weeping unashamedly, moved to tears by the dark events enacted on stage. This was only their third date but at that moment Caitlin knew that she would spend much of her future with Janusz - and discovering Poland. The country began to piece itself together in her mind… a defiant land with a proud but troubled history… a land which seemed to lie ever beyond her reach.

For the first time, in the final summer of university, she visited Poland, a country whose history, literature and grammar remained foreign to her. Despite her ignorance, she found herself sinking at ease into the cobbled streets of Katowice, the dollhouse buildings of Kraków and the rolling hillsides of Krosno. During previous travels, she had squinted at countries as she had at dictionaries, an outsider, come to observe but not to participate, in no danger of being swept into anything unexpected. That summer, as she toured beer factories in Tychy, rattled her way down to salt mines in Bochnia and danced till her feet ached in Warszawa, she felt that she was not studying anymore, she was just living.

And, of course, she met Janusz’s family.

Janusz’s grandmothers were awesome ladies to behold. They reminded Caitlin of Granny Mainland and Granny Island, the two venerable grandmothers of her favourite children’s book, *Katie Morag*. Granny Island trudged about in muddy wellington boots with a dog bouncing around at her ankles while Granny Mainland always had beautifully curled hair.

“*Ahoj Babciu*!” was Janusz’s habitual greeting to his Katowice grandmother, Stasia (Granny Mainland) who had grown up in what was now Ukraine and had been accustomed to speaking certain phrases of greeting (and of affection) in Czech, for her husband had grown up in the border town of Cieszyn. Stasia had been rather a beauty in former days and, as she shuffled about in her furry slippers, still maintained the flirtatious manners of her youth. Every holiday, they followed the same routine. Clutching a bag of *pączki*, Caitlin and Janusz navigated the four flights of stairs leading up to her little flat. Following hugs and kisses, they would settle around mugs of coffee in companionable and mutual incomprehension. Stasia had been a tour guide for the Soviet Union and its satellite states and would drift at length over those heady, youthful days, speeding across frozen landscapes to Siberia and whirling across the Eastern Bloc in a mist of perfume and lipstick.

Janusz’s second grandmother, Zosia (Granny Island), was altogether different. About half Caitlin’s height, she maintained a small but substantial farm, complete with chickens and goats, in her back garden. Upon arrival, she would dish out bowls of clear *barszcz* before setting them to their afternoon’s work, preparing *pierogi* and scooping up mounds of walnuts from the ground. As Caitlin and Janusz crouched on the damp earth, the brown lumps would multiply before their eyes and harvesting them inevitably absorbed their afternoons. This grandmother had been an English and History teacher at the local primary school and would regularly turn to Caitlin, open her mouth, close it again and then simply gaze at her with an expression of mingled concern and frustration as she struggled to call the appropriate English words to mind. She was a no-nonsense sort of lady and repeatedly expressed her incomprehension at the fact that Caitlin had not yet mastered the Polish language.

Both grandmothers were, in fact, joined in an insistence on the fact that, following the Second World War, numerous English ladies had fallen for and married Polish soldiers. Following their nuptials, these women had effortlessly conquered the Polish language, culture and cuisine with an elegant swirl of their ‘50’s skirts. These formidable English forbears began to haunt Caitlin, silently judging her across the decades. As one of Caitlin’s friends laughingly commented, her voice seemed strangely suited to Polish. Something about its relatively high pitch made it sound right when she spoke the language and Caitlin desperately wanted to begin learning in earnest. Against all the odds and expectations, and in defiance of the hours spent hunched over French and German dictionaries, she knew that Polish would be the language she must eventually master.

Slowly, despite their lack of a common language, Caitlin grew closer to Janusz’s family. His mother was a tax consultant, a highly successful and efficient business woman who still spent her weekends baking and gardening in the countryside. His father worked as a consultant engineer in Silesian coal mines. His job involved sound waves and various scarily technical procedures. Caitlin had had them explained to her numerous times but somehow forgot them every visit and had to hear them once again. Through one family, history opened its doors: living, breathing, irregular history, inviting Caitlin to observe… and to participate.

Thus, she began to write… about herself and about Poland, hoping to clarify the place of the tribe in her mind and to draw nearer to its private core.

*Me and Poland*, February 10th, 2013

Poland lies across the Channel, a sprawling presence on the edge of my consciousness. I long to read its poetry, to sit, sipping coffee, in its cafes and to scale its mountains. Translations are not enough – I feel the distance echoing between myself and the original words inked on paper. I hold Szymborska’s verses in my mind. Their sweet and profound simplicity draws me close to her… but I want to get closer still, to understand why she chose one word over another, why she preferred one turn of phrase in favour of all others… I feel as though she writes my thoughts… and wish to know the language in which she has written them…

*Wolę w miłości rocznice nieokrągłe,
do obchodzenia na co dzień.
Wolę moralistów,
którzy nie obiecują mi nic.
Wolę dobroć przebiegłą od łatwowiernej za bardzo.
Wolę ziemię w cywilu.
Wolę kraje podbite niż podbijające.
Wolę mieć zastrzeżenia.
Wolę piekło chaosu od piekła porządku.
Wolę bajki Grimma od pierwszych stron gazet.
Wolę liście bez kwiatów niż kwiaty bez liści.*

A month ago, it was reported that Polish is now the second most spoken language in Britain. With so many people dreaming of their home across the sea, I too am infected by a strange nostalgia. In Britain, we are surrounded by different tribes, each with their own password, and how sad would it be to remain forever closed to them? I feel as though half of my mind is struggling to throw off its Englishness and become the other, fall in with the tribe. I think of all the conversations which I will one day have, the stories which I will hear and the words which I am yearning to absorb. I shall make industrial supplies of dumplings and master the art of *szarlotka*. I shall frequent a milk bar and eat twelve dishes on *Wigilia*. I shall understand the jokes which Mozder tells his audience at a London jazz club… I shall steal my way in… no matter the work and no matter the time it takes!