



SWIMMING  
IN THE  
DARK

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JEDROWSKI

BLOOMSBURY

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*To Laurent, my home.*

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A NOTE ON THE AUTHOR

‘As to the action which is about to begin, it takes  
place in Poland – that is to say, nowhere’

Alfred Jarry  
*Ubu Roi*

‘Wszystko mija, nawet najdłuższa żmija’  
(‘Everything passes, even the longest of vipers’)

Stanisław Jerzy Lec  
*Unkempt Thoughts*



## PROLOGUE

I don't know what woke me up tonight. Not the branch of the chestnut tree knocking against my window, not *Pani Kolecka* coughing in the room next door. Not any more. Maybe it was the ghosts of these noises, swept up by the wind, carried across the ocean to knock on my consciousness. Maybe. What I am certain of is this: my body feels depleted, like a foreign country after a war. And yet I cannot go back to sleep.

I think of you. The face that my memory can conjure up with its rough outlines and fine details, with the grey-blue eyes the same colour as the Baltic Sea in winter. I think of your face while I get up, while I move in the darkness from bed to window, clothes lying around the floor like unfinished thoughts. And then I recall yesterday evening, and the chill of it makes me stop in my tracks. The radio was on, song hour like every day after work: something light was playing, I can't remember what. I was standing in the kitchen looking for the coffee when the music stopped.

*'We are interrupting the programme for a special announcement,' said the lady in her soft, round voice. 'This morning, on December the thirteenth, martial law has been declared in the Socialist Republic of Poland. It follows weeks of strikes and unrest by pro-democracy protesters, and the meteoric rise of the first independent trade union of the communist bloc, Solidarność' (mispronounced). 'In a televised address, the government announced a series of drastic measures: schools and universities have been shut down, the country's borders have been closed and curfews have been imposed on the population. We will keep you updated on any further developments.'*

The music went on.

I can't even tell you what I felt in that moment. It was the purest form of paralysis. My body must have shut down before my mind could react. I have no idea how I made it into bed.

I light a cigarette by the window. Outside, the street is empty, and the night's rain shimmers on the pavement, reflecting the two-storey buildings and crackling neon. '24 hours,' says the hamburger joint down the block. 'Wanda's Greenpoint Convenience,' whispers another in red and white. Police sirens wail in the distance. Bizarrely, they are the same as at home. Whenever I hear one the hair on my forearm stands on end. They remind me of the night when that same shrill sound filled the air of a city far away. Before that city became an outline, an item on the foreign news. Before loneliness covered me like night-blue tar.

I don't know whether I ever want you to read this, but I know that I need to write it. Because you've been on my mind for too long. Ever since that day, twelve months ago, when I got on a plane and flew through the thick layers of cloud across the ocean. A year since I saw you, a year that has felt like limbo – ever since then I've been lying to myself. And now that I am stuck here, in the dreadful safety of America, while our country is falling apart, I am done with pretending that I've erased you from my mind. Some things cannot be erased through silence. Some people have that power over you, whether you like it or not. I begin to see that now. Some people, some events, make you lose your head. They're like guillotines, cutting your life in two, the dead and the alive, the before and after.

It's best to start with the beginning – or at least what feels like it. I realise now that we never talked much about our pasts. Maybe it would have changed something if we had, maybe we would have understood each other better and everything would have been different. Who can say? Either way, I probably never told you about Beniek. He came more than a decade before you. I was nine, and so was he.



## CHAPTER 1

I had known him almost all my life, Beniek. He lived around the corner from us, in our neighbourhood in Wrocław, composed of rounded streets and three-storey apartment buildings that from the air formed a giant eagle, the symbol of our nation. There were hedges and wide courtyards with a little garden for each flat, and cool, damp cellars and dusty attics. It hadn't even been twenty years since any of our families had come to live there. Our postboxes still said '*Briefe*' in German. Everyone – the people who'd lived here before and the people who replaced them – had been forced to leave their home. From one day to the next, the continent's borders had shifted, redrawn like the chalk lines of the hopscotch we played on the pavement. At the end of the war, the east of Germany became Poland and the east of Poland became the Soviet Union. Granny's family were forced to leave their land near Lwów. The Soviets took their house and hauled them on the same cattle trains that had brought the Jews to the camps a year or two earlier. They ended up in Wrocław, a city inhabited by the Germans for hundreds of years, in a flat only just deserted by some family we'd never know, their dishes still in the sink, their breadcrumbs on the table. This is where I grew up.

It was on the wide pavements, lined with trees and benches, that all the children of the neighbourhood played together. We would play catch and skip ropes with the girls, and run around the courtyards, screaming, jumping on to the double bars that looked like rugby posts and on which the women would hang and beat their carpets. We'd get told off by adults and run away. We were dusty children. We'd race through the streets in summer in our shorts and knee-high socks and suspenders, and in flimsy wool coats when the ground was covered in leaves in autumn, and we'd continue running after frost invaded the ground and the air scratched our lungs and our breath turned to clouds before our eyes. In spring, on Śmigus-Dyngus day, we'd throw bucketloads of water over any girl who wasn't quick enough to escape, and then we'd chase and soak each other, returning home drenched to the bone. On Sundays, we'd throw pebbles at the milk bottles standing on the windowsills higher up where no one could steal them, and we'd run away in genuine fear when a bottle broke and the

milk ran slowly down the building, white streams trickling down the sooty facade like tears.

Beniek was part of that band of kids, one of the bolder ones. I don't think we ever talked back then, but I was aware of him. He was taller than most of us, and somehow darker, with long eyelashes and a rebellious stare. And he was kind. Once, when we were running from an adult after some mischief now long forgotten, I stumbled and fell on to the sharp gravel. The others overtook me, dust gathering, and I tried to stand. My knee was bleeding.

'You alright?'

Beniek was standing over me with his hand outstretched. I reached for it and felt the strength of his body raise me to my feet.

'Thank you,' I murmured, and he smiled encouragingly before running off. I followed him as fast as I could, happy, forgetting the pain in my knee.

Later, Beniek went off to a different school, and I stopped seeing him. But we met again for our First Communion.

The community's church was a short walk from our street, beyond the little park where we never played because of the drunkards, and beyond the graveyard where Mother would be buried years later. We'd go every Sunday, to church. Granny said there were families that only went for the holidays, or never, and I was jealous of the children who didn't have to go as often as me.

When the lessons for the First Communion started, we'd all meet twice a week in the crypt. The classes were run by Father Klaszewski, a priest who was small and old but quick, and whose blue eyes had almost lost their colour. He was patient, most of the time, resting his hands on his black robe while he spoke, one holding the other, and taking us in with his small, washed-out eyes. But sometimes, at some minor stupidity, like when we chatted or made faces at each other, he would explode, and grab one of us by the ear, seemingly at random, his warm thumb and index finger tightly around the lobe, tearing, until we saw black and stars. This rarely happened for the worst behaviour. It was like an arbitrary weapon, scarier for its randomness and unpredictability, like the wrath of some unreasonable god.

This is where I saw Beniek again. I was surprised that he was there, because I had never seen him at church. He had changed. The skinny child I remembered was turning into a man – or so I thought – and even though we were only nine you could already see manhood budding within him: a strong neck with a place made out for his Adam's apple; long, strong legs

that would stick out of his shorts as we sat in a circle in the priest's room; muscles visible beneath the skin; fine hair appearing above his knees. He still had the same unruly hair, curly and black; and the same eyes, dark and softly mischievous. I think we both recognised the other, though we didn't acknowledge it. But after the first couple of meetings we started to talk. I don't remember what about. How does one bond with another child, as a child? Maybe it's simply through common interests. Or maybe it's something that lies deeper, for which everything you say and do is an unwitting code. But the point is, we did get on. Naturally. And after Bible study, which was on Tuesday and Thursday afternoons, we'd take the tram all the way to the city centre, riding past the zoo and its neon lion perched on top of the entrance gate, past the domed Centennial Hall the Germans had built to mark the anniversary of something no one cared to remember. We rode across the iron bridges over the calm, brown Odra river. There were many empty lots along the way, the city like a mouth with missing teeth. Some blocks only had one lonely, sooty building standing there all by itself, like a dirty island in a black sea.

We didn't tell anyone about our escapes – our parents would not have allowed it. Mother would have worried: about the red-faced veterans who sold trinkets in the market square with their cut-off limbs exposed, about 'perverts' – the word falling from her lips like a two-limbed snake, dangerous and exciting. So we'd sneak away without a word and imagine we were pirates riding through the city on our own. I felt both free and protected in his company. We'd go to the kiosks and run our fingers over the large smooth pages of the expensive magazines, pointing out things we could hardly comprehend – Asian monks, African tribesmen, cliff divers from Mexico – and marvelling at the sheer immensity of the world and the colours that glowed just underneath the black and white of the pages.

We started meeting on other days too, after school. Mostly we went to my flat. We'd play cards on the floor of my tiny room, the width of a radiator, while Mother was out working, and Granny came to bring us milk and bread sprinkled with sugar. We only went to his place once. The staircase of the building was the same as ours, damp and dark, but somehow it seemed colder and dirtier. Inside, the flat was different – there were more books, and no crosses anywhere. We sat in Beniek's room, the same size as mine, and listened to records that he'd been sent by relatives from abroad. It was there that I heard the Beatles for the first time, singing 'Help!' and 'I Want to Hold Your Hand', instantly hurling me into a world I loved. His father sat on the couch in the living room reading a book, his white shirt the brightest thing I'd ever seen. He was quiet and soft-spoken,

and I envied Beniek. I envied him because I had never had a real father, because mine had left when I was still a child and hadn't cared to see me much since. His mother I remember only vaguely. She made us grilled fish and we sat together at the table in the kitchen, the fish salty and dry, its bones pinching the insides of my cheeks. She had black hair too, and although her eyes were the same as Beniek's, they looked strangely absent when she smiled. Even then, I found it odd that I, a child, should feel pity for an adult.

One evening, when my mother came home from work, I asked her if Beniek could come and live with us. I wanted him to be like my brother, to be around me always. My mother took off her long coat and hung it on the hook by the door. I could tell from her face that she wasn't in a good mood.

'You know, Beniek is different from us,' she said with a sneer. 'He couldn't really be part of the family.'

'What do you mean?' I asked, puzzled. Granny appeared by the kitchen door, holding a rag.

'Drop it, Gosia. Beniek is a good boy, and he is going to Communion. Now come, both of you, the food is getting cold.'

One Saturday afternoon, Beniek and I were playing catch on the strip outside our building with some other children from the neighbourhood. I remember it was a warm and humid day, with the sun only peeking through the clouds. We played and ran, driven by the rising heat in the air, feeling protected under the roof of the chestnut trees. We were so caught up in our game that we hardly noticed the sky growing dark and the rain beginning to fall. The pavement turned black with moisture, and we enjoyed the wetness after a scorching day, our hair glued to our faces like seaweed. I remember Beniek vividly like this, running, aware of nothing but the game, joyous, utterly free. When we were exhausted and the rain had soaked through our clothes, we hurried back to my apartment. Granny was at the window, calling us home, exclaiming that we'd catch a cold. Inside, she led us to the bathroom and made us strip off all our clothes and dry ourselves. I was aware of wanting to see Beniek naked, surprised by the swiftness of this wish, and my heart leapt when he undressed. His body was solid and full of mysteries, white and flat and strong, like a man's (or so I thought). His nipples were larger and darker than mine; his penis was bigger, longer. But most confusingly, it was naked at the tip, like the acorns we played with in autumn. I had never really seen anyone else's, and wondered whether there was something wrong with mine, whether this

is what Mother had meant when she'd said Beniek was different. Either way, this difference excited me. After we had rubbed ourselves dry, Granny wrapped us in large blankets and it felt like we had returned from a journey to a wondrous land. 'Come to the kitchen!' she called with atypical joy. We sat at the table and had hot black tea and waffles. I cannot remember anything ever tasting so good. I was intoxicated, something tingling inside me like soft pain.

Our Communion excursion arrived. We went up north, towards Sopot. It was the sort of early summer that erases any memory of other seasons, one where light and warmth clasp and feed you to the absolute. We drove by bus, forty children or so, to a cordoned-off leisure centre near a forest, beyond which lay the sea. I shared a room with Beniek and two other boys, sleeping on bunk beds, me on top of him. We went on walks and sang and prayed. We played Bible games, organised by Father Klaszewski. We visited an old wooden chapel in the forest, hidden between groves of pine trees, and prayed with rosaries like an army of obedient angels.

In the afternoons we were free. Beniek and I and some other boys would go to the beach and swim in the cold and turbulent Baltic. Afterwards, he and I would dry off and leave the others. We'd climb the dunes of the beach and wade through its lunar landscape until we found a perfect crest: high and hidden like the crater of a dormant volcano. There we'd curl up like tired storks after a sea crossing and fall asleep with the kind summer wind on our backs.

On the last night of our stay, the supervisors organised a dance for us, a celebration of our upcoming ceremony. The centre's canteen was turned into a sort of disco. There was sugary fruit *kompot* and salt sticks and music played from a radio. At first we were all shy, feeling pushed into adulthood. Boys stood on one side of the room in shorts and knee-high socks, and girls on the other with their skirts and white blouses. After one boy was asked to dance with his sister, we all started to move on to the dance floor, some in couples, others in groups, swaying and jumping, excited by the drink and the music and the realisation that all this was really for us.

Beniek and I were dancing in a loose group with the boys from our room when, without warning, the lights went off. Night had already fallen outside and now it rushed into the room. The girls shrieked and the music continued. I felt elated, suddenly high on the possibilities of the dark, and some unknown barrier receded in my mind. I could see Beniek's outline near me, and the need to kiss him crept out of the night like a wolf. It was

the first time I had consciously wanted to pull anyone towards me. The desire reached me like a distinct message from deep within, a place I had never sensed before but recognised immediately. I moved towards him in a trance. His body showed no resistance when I pulled it against mine and embraced him, feeling the hardness of his bones, my face against his, and the warmth of his breath. This is when the lights turned back on. We looked at each other with eyes full of fright, aware of the people standing around us, looking at us. We pulled apart. And though we continued to dance, I no longer heard the music. I was transported into a vision of my life that made me so dizzy my head began to spin. Shame, heavy and alive, had materialised, built from buried fears and desires.

That evening, I lay in the dark in my bed, above Beniek, and tried to examine this shame. It was like a newly grown organ, monstrous and pulsating and suddenly part of me. It didn't cross my mind that Beniek might be thinking the same. I would have found it impossible to believe that anyone else could be in my position. Over and over I replayed that moment in my head, watched myself pull him in to me, my head turning on the pillow, wishing it away. It was almost dawn when sleep finally relieved me.

The next morning we stripped the sheets off our beds and packed our things. The boys were excited, talking about the disco, about the prettiest girls, about home and real food.

'I can't wait for a four-egg omelette,' said one pudgy boy.

Someone else made a face at him. 'You voracious hedgehog!'

Everyone laughed, including Beniek, his mouth wide open, all his teeth showing. I could see right in to his tonsils, dangling at the back of his throat, moving with the rhythm of his laughter. And despite the sweeping wave of communal cheer, I couldn't join in. It was as if there were a wall separating me from the other boys, one I hadn't seen before but which was now clear and irreversible. Beniek tried to catch my eye and I turned away in shame. When we arrived in Wrocław and our parents picked us up, I felt like I was returning as a different, putrid person, and could never go back to who I had been before.

We had no more Bible class the following week, and Mother and Granny finished sewing my white gown for the ceremony. Soon, they started cooking and preparing for our relatives to visit. There was excitement in the house, and I shared none of it. Beniek was a reminder that I had unleashed something terrible into the world, something precious and dangerous. Yet I still wanted to see him. I couldn't bring myself to go to his house, but I listened for a knock on the door, hoping he would come.

He didn't. Instead, the day of the Communion arrived. I could hardly sleep the night before, knowing that I would see him again. In the morning, I got up and washed my face with cold water. It was a sunny day in that one week of summer when fluffy white balls of seeds fly through the streets and cover the pavements, and the morning light is brilliant, almost blinding. I pulled on the white high-collared robe, which reached all the way to my ankles. It was hard to move in. I had to hold myself evenly and seriously like a monk. We got to the church early and I stood on the steps overlooking the street. Families hurried past me, girls in their white lace robes and with flower wreaths on their heads. Father Klaszewski was there, in a long robe with red sleeves and gold threads, talking to excited parents. Everyone was there, except for Beniek. I stood and looked for him in the crowd. The church bells started to ring, announcing the beginning of the ceremony, and my stomach felt hollow.

'Come in, dear,' said Granny, taking me by the shoulder. 'It's about to begin.'

'But Beniek—'

'He must be inside,' she said, her voice grave. I knew she was lying. She dragged me by the hand and I let her.

The church was cool and the organ started playing as Granny led me to Halina, a stolid girl with lacy gloves and thick braids, and we moved down the aisle hand in hand, a procession of couples, little boys and little girls in pairs, dressed all in white. Father Klaszewski stood at the front and spoke of our souls, our innocence and the beginning of a journey with God. The thick, heavy incense made my head turn. From the corner of my eye I saw the benches filled with families and spotted Granny and her sisters and Mother, looking at me with tense pride. Halina's hand was hot and sweaty in mine, like a little animal. And still, no Beniek. Father Klaszewski opened the tabernacle and took out a silver bowl filled with wafers. The music became like thunder, the organ loud and plaintive, and one by one boy and girl stepped up to him and got on our knees as he placed the wafer into our mouths, on our tongues, and one by one we walked off and out of the church. The queue ahead of me diminished and diminished, and soon it was my turn. I knelt on the red carpet. His old fingers set the flake on to my tongue, dry meeting wet. I stood and walked out into the blinding sunlight, confused and afraid, swallowing the bitter mixture in my mouth.

The next day I went to Beniek's house and knocked on his door with a trembling hand, my palms sweating beyond my control. A moment later I heard steps on the other side, then the door opened, revealing a woman I had never seen before.



‘What?’ she said roughly. She was large and her face was like grey creased paper. A cigarette dangled from her mouth.

I was taken aback, and asked, my voice aware of its own futility, whether Beniek was there. She took the cigarette out of her mouth.

‘Can’t you see the name on the door?’ She tapped on the little square by the doorbell. ‘KOWALSKI’, it said in capital letters. ‘Those Jews don’t live here any more. Understood?’ It sounded as if she were telling off a dog. ‘Now don’t ever bother us again, or else my husband will give you a beating you won’t forget.’ She shut the door in my face.

I stood there, dumbfounded. Then I ran up and down the stairs, looking for the Eisenszteins on the neighbouring doors, ringing the other bells, wondering whether I was in the wrong building.

‘They left,’ whispered a voice through a half-opened door. It was a lady I knew from church.

‘Where to?’ I asked, my despair suspended for an instant.

She looked around the landing as if to see whether someone was listening. ‘Israel.’ The word was a whisper and meant nothing to me, though its ominous rolled sound was still unsettling.

‘When are they coming back?’

Her hands were wrapped around the door, and she shook her head slowly. ‘You better find someone else to play with, little one.’ She nodded and closed the door.

I stood in the silent stairwell and felt terror travel from my navel, tying my throat, pinching my eyes. Tears started to slide down my cheeks like melted butter. For a long time I felt nothing but their heat.

Did you ever have someone like that, someone that you loved in vain when you were younger? Did you ever feel something like my shame? I always assumed that you must have, that you can’t possibly have gone through life as carelessly as you made out. But now I begin to think that not everyone suffers in the same way; that not everyone, in fact, suffers. Not from the same things, at any rate. And in a way this is what made us possible, you and me.

## CHAPTER 2

We were on that bus together. Warszawa, 1980. It was warm, the beginning of June, the summer after our final university exams. And although we'd been in the same year throughout our studies, we didn't know each other. You'd never gone to lectures, never needed to. So we could have just as well never met.

The bus was waiting for more people to arrive. I sat by the window, the orange wool curtains drawn to block out the sun, rereading *Quo Vadis*. I cared less about the religious part than about the love story, the heroic turns, the bravery of opposition. This is how I lived back then – through books. I locked myself into their stories, dreamt of their characters at night, pretended to be them. They were my armour against the hard edges of reality. I carried them with me wherever I went, like a talisman in my pocket, thinking of them as almost more real than the people around me, who spoke and lived in denial, destined, I thought, to never do anything worth recounting.

I drew back the curtain and looked at myself in the reflection of the window. There were days that I liked what I saw – the long arched nose, the almond-shaped eyes. But most days not. Most days I felt a dull reproach against myself, an alienation from my twenty-two-year-old body.

The bus was filling up, the atmosphere giddy, laced with the promise of summer. The seat next to me was empty until Karolina appeared and hurled herself on to it, her big-mouthed smile tinged with her particular kind of sarcasm.

'Ready to be turned into a peasant?' she said.

I put the book on my lap. 'Can't wait,' I said, trying to look deadpan.

Karolina laughed, throwing back her head. 'And I can't wait to see you getting down and dirty in those fields.'

The bus was almost full now, and the driver climbed in, cigarette glued to his lips, and off we went. We vibrated with the rhythm of the clattering engine. Sun streamed on to my face and, outside, the spire of the city's symbol – Stalin's Palace of Culture – reached so high into the soft-blue sky it made your neck hurt to look at it. I was strangely elated. I had always liked the act of leaving, the expanse between departure and arrival

when you're seemingly nowhere, defined by another kind of time. This journey reminded me of the ride I'd taken four years earlier: the day I'd taken the train to Warszawa for the first time by myself, to come to the capital, to leave my old self behind. I'd stood on the platform with Granny, two large suitcases next to us, a handkerchief in her gloved hand dabbing her glassy eyes. She didn't want me to go, but she didn't say anything. I was eighteen, itching to leave. I'd kissed her hastily and got on the train, feeling selfish to be leaving her, dragging the suitcases to my compartment, passing smoking soldiers leaning out of the window in the narrow corridor. I'd settled into my compartment, between men in worn suits and women in hats, drinking tea from flasks and peeling apples, and eating boiled eggs wrapped in white lace cloths like christened babies. The train had moved off, and I'd fallen into a lull, villages sunk in forests rushing past. Selfish. Growing into yourself is nothing but that.

Our bus drove on to a bridge to cross the Wisła. The trees were a clear green, and the banks of the river filled with them like a head of dense curls. The smell of linden trees and lilac was in the air, sweet and colourful and intoxicating, submerging the city. The sandy shores were deserted, making the whole embankment appear wild. If it hadn't been for the tops of the grey tower blocks just behind the thickness of the trees, it would have looked as if no human had ever lived here.

I turned back to Karolina. She was smoking, her wide lips painted coral-red and leaving a mark on the mouth of the cigarette. I can't remember ever having seen her without that lipstick, or without the dark-blonde fringe that framed her unruly eyes.

'You're alright?' she asked, cocking her head. I nodded, and couldn't help but smile. I was glad to have her with me. We'd met in first year, and since then she'd become like a sister to me. It was she who'd taught me half of what I cared to know. She had a stack of under-the-counter books, which we read and discussed together. She'd introduced me to Simone de Beauvoir and Miłosz, to the poems of Szymborska and the travel accounts of Kapuściński. Sometimes, she'd compare our country with Haile Selassie's Ethiopia and declare we needed a similar revolution. I admired her courage to speak her mind.

'Please,' she'd say and pull her eyebrows together whenever I'd ask if she wasn't afraid of speaking out. Mother and Granny had fed me stories of terror, of people they knew back in the day disappearing for one critical comment.

'Stalin's been dead for a long time,' Karolina would say. 'We know the

system is a farce, *they* know it's a farce. And we're not in East Germany, thank God. Here, they're sleepwalking.'

The countryside began and we bumped along the roads past vast fields and birch forests and endless stretches of pines, and little tired towns with church spires sticking out. I don't know whether Karolina fully knew about me – I think she suspected it. But she never pushed me, never confronted me, and I have always been grateful to her for that. It's the sort of subtlety I'm not sure I would have had in her place. Only once did she come close to overstepping the line. It was a month or so before the camp, after a play at the National Theatre – we'd gone to see Mrozek's *Tango*. We felt like a drink and she took me to a small bar tucked away in a narrow side street in the Old Town. She said this was where the actors went. The place was full of smoke and dark animated figures by the bar, spilling out on to the pavement. It was the beginning of summer. I could tell what many of those men were but, at first, didn't want it to be real. There was an exuberance about them that disturbed me deeply. It was their curling voices, the 'darlings' that padded their sentences, their quick, voracious eyes, the movement of their hips as Donna Summer moaned 'I Feel Love' over hypnotic electric beats, a song I had loved and now berated myself for ever having liked. They threw one furtive glance at me and I felt see-through. Karolina didn't seem to notice anything unusual – there were women too, relaxed and sly and loud. I looked at her sideways, wondering whether she was really oblivious or just pretending. I wanted to leave right then and there, wanted to stop noticing, stop searching for a face that I would desire and could never have, but Karolina ordered us drinks and I managed to stay and talk and to keep my eyes mostly on her. By the time our beers were almost empty, I'd grown restless and angry, asked her why she had brought me there. She was casual, as always. She said a friend had recommended the place.

'What friend?' I asked.

She made a face like she was thinking. 'You wouldn't know him.'

I nodded, smiled ironically. 'Fine. Can we leave now?'

Her face was unchanged, as if she hadn't heard me. She drank the rest of her beer in one go, put her money on the bar and got up from her stool. 'Let me just go to the bathroom.'

She walked off and I stood alone in the crowd, feeling entirely powerless, an embarrassed child in the midst of pleasures it couldn't grasp. No, it was worse than that. Beside me, two old men in suits who had appraised us spoke in excited voices.

'You know, darling,' said one to his friend, in a stage whisper, with a

fur collar around the lapel of his jacket, sounding drunk, ‘you must read that unpublished Baldwin I told you about. It moved me to tears. If that won’t make you wake up, nothing will.’

The other one – very thin – nodded. ‘You’ll pass it to me, will you, darling?’

‘Yes, but be careful with it, you know it’s not even my copy, it’s hers,’ and he pointed at a man in a white silk shirt across the bar, deep in conversation with what looked like one of the actors from the play we had seen, a pretty boy with wavy blond hair and a small upturned nose.

After this, Karolina came back from the ladies’ and we left. I was determined to take nothing from this place, not one memory, not one conclusion for myself. But like stones thrown into the sky with all one’s might, pieces of that night – the boys and the men who wanted them, the flirtation, the codes of seduction I could only guess at – returned to me with even greater intensity than I had lived them. The law of gravity applies to memories too. And one day, as I sat in the library trying to work, to clear my mind, I remembered the book. I found his name in a catalogue of the foreign literature department. Baldwin. James. There was a list of his works, and only one of them had no official translation: *Giovanni’s Room*. This had to be it, I thought. I shut the catalogue, tried to forget about it. But the title wouldn’t leave me in peace, tantalising me like a loose tooth. I set out for it. And after weeks of searching, weeks of questions to suspicious-looking shop attendants who’d tell me there was no such book, that it had never been translated, I got lucky. It was just a few days before camp, in a tiny *antykwariat* bookshop that specialised in art and history, run by a man who could have been a friend of those men in the bar. He shot me a meaningful, almost amused look, then walked off to a back room and returned with a rustling brown-paper package.

When it was time to pack for the camp, I tore off the cover and glued the pages neatly into another book, burying it deep down at the bottom of my bag.

Our bus arrived at the end of the afternoon, as the sun was getting weaker but hadn’t yet begun to set. The camp lay just outside a village, surrounded by low wooden fences and lined by a little river on one side. The bus stopped in front of the main building, a wide concrete bungalow with a clock on its facade and a set of flags (white and red, hammer and sickle) hanging limply from its front. A short, stout man in a uniform watched us with small, attentive eyes as we climbed out of the bus, slightly dizzy, shaken from the ride.