



Jana

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We were sitting in the "Angels" restaurant garden. It was an August evening, one of those nights when, out of the blue, one starts feeling that summer has already passed, though autumn hasn't come yet. A short moment of suspense, as if outside the natural rhythm of time, when the evening light makes the world seem motionless, pure, and as permanent as a cool, polished emerald, which one cannot sell nor buy, as it can't be grasped in the hands, let alone packed. But we were people of the tangible and the concrete. We both worked "in property". I'd known of my interlocutor, Councillor G., for quite some time, although we'd never done any business together. This evening, accompanied by a bottle of Bordeaux, was terminating a long period of negotiations concerning a sizeable, thoroughly measured piece of land near the city centre.

Our lazy conversation concerned, of course, real estate, and the charms of possessing seemingly lasting objects, only to get rid of them as fast as possible, for as much as possible, which is the measurable reward for a lack of sentimental attachments to places and buildings.

Councillor G. was considered extremely efficient in the trade market, possibly because – as they said – he didn't put his "heart" into it.

Furthermore, he was said to be unpredictable when it came to business. There were times when he would break off promising negotiations in a way that was completely incomprehensible not only to the law firm's clients, but to his closest colleagues as well.

We were sitting in silence for a while, watching the progress of imminent nightfall: the lamps turning on and the northern wall of St. Nicolas Cathedral's tower glowing as

if whitewashed by the searchlights, illuminating it from below and making the slender steeple stand out gently against the dark blue sky on which soon the first August stars were to appear. Swifts were hovering around the cathedral's spire, drawing circles in the evening sky and letting out high, sharp cries as if they were giving some sort of dramatic warning.



Apparently Councillor G. was watching the birds too, since, reaching for his glass of wine, he said with a heavy sigh:

"Swifts, swifts – birds of my childhood. And do you know," he went on, while his eyes were still following the swift loops, "that those are our only birds that spend their whole lives never touching the ground?" I admitted that I wasn't aware of that. "Their legs are completely unadapted to walking," he continued, "and in order to rest, they use the roughness of walls or any cracks they can find. Yet they fly perfectly. Just take a look."

Councillor G. made a wide gesture as if he was opening a curtain separating us from the cathedral and the birds around its tower.

"They build their nests using whatever they can snatch in flight," he added. "It doesn't seem like much – and yet. Do you remember the Station Square?" he asked, suddenly changing the topic.

"Of course I do," I responded.

At the time it was said to be the most desirable lot in town. A huge piece of land, at least for urban standards, located in the very heart of town – that is, if our little town could be considered to have a heart at all. That lot was quite a treat for many investors, and pretty much all real estate agencies were interested in it. As far as I knew, Councillor G. had also participated in the bidding and the negotiations with the town. Maybe – as it was rumoured – he even temporarily owned the plaza.

"Someone struck gold with that plot," I said hoping to learn more about his legendary deals.

"I could've bought that plaza real cheap—" he continued, as if not hearing my comment. "There was a shooting gallery there once."

I remembered that shooting gallery. It was part of the funfair that used to come to the town every summer from Czechoslovakia. Just a typical amusement park: big wheel, small and large merry-go-rounds, bumper cars, a hall of distorting mirrors in which our bellies looked like they actually do today, but it seemed awfully funny at the time; a ghost cave with an old-fashioned skeleton and a mysterious hand that would feel around the visitors in the dark – mainly, as it seemed, merrily frightened girls. An excellently thriving business in our sleepy town; business that drained the pockets of the youngsters, kids' last coins; luring them with ice cream, cotton candy, Karel Gott's hits and the Czech aura of exoticism. Undoubtedly, the Czechs knew how to sell us our childhood dreams.

"And do you remember Jana, the shooting gallery girl?" he asked as if unconcerned, fiddling with an empty wine glass.

"I don't remember," I replied as I poured the wine. "I must confess I never had much interest in the shooting gallery. Merry-go-rounds, that was what fascinated me. You know, the girls flying up in the sky, on the red seats, in bright dresses. And us, the boys, in non-iron clothes with mouths gaping. My Lady Carnival. Cloud nine! I could stand for hours and gape at them as they whirled and squeaked – as if they were frightened. And that guy that would shout: *teraz deweczki bedze szbka izda!* Do you remember?"

Councillor G. took a sip of his Bordeaux, smiled and nodded in understanding.

"Zdenek," he muttered under his breath. "Zdenek was in charge of the swing ride. I remember him wearing *chic* jeans, always walking around shirtless, tanned, not a care in the world. A young man. Master of the ceremony. But I couldn't get enough of that shooting gallery, where the beautiful Jana was the queen of hearts. Her red corduroy shorts. White shirt. Blonde hair, tied in a ponytail. Painfully attractive. Maybe it was because she stood on the platform, right behind the counter, but she seemed completely inaccessible, like royalty on a throne. It was she who would break the gun, leaning its butt on her hip, load a shot or a dart, depending on the request, close the carbine with a heavy but surprisingly soft snap and hand it to the client. She performed this ritual hundreds of times every day. Her gestures and curves shaped our young imagination, which meant, I suspect, that Jana ruled over many a heart. Young hearts – yet already broken – like the air gun."

Councillor G. laughed at his own comparison.

"Let's drink," I proposed, "Here's to the cardiological problems of youth!"

We burst out laughing. My interlocutor went on.

"The shooting gallery looked the most beautiful in the evening. A bright, well-lit box with one wall lifted up like a curtain revealing the stage of a little theatre; above the shooting gallery – dark night and stars, and on the little stage – all the colourful treasures of the world to be won: red lollipops, teddy bears, fans of all colours, compact mirrors with Rachel Welch – topless...on the back," he added quietly. "Beautiful Jana held sway over it all. Her smile and her curves emanated a kind of extraordinary, mysterious promise which then, and still now, I could neither apprehend nor voice."

Councillor G. broke off his story. He lit a cigarette and, with a smile on his face, he said:

"You know, if it was not me but Immanuel Kant who had been standing there and staring for hours, then he probably would have declared: the starry heavens above me and the painful curves of Jana within me. But well, Kant was not there, and in my mind, instead of distinct thoughts, there was only a confusing haze of desires and undefined hunches woken to life by the sight of her. Throughout the whole summer, I had tried to pluck up the courage to at least once shoot and win, besides the Rachel Welch compact mirror, Jana's praise and smile."

"At the end of the holidays, when it was already clear that the funfair was about to leave, I gathered all my courage and decided to go to the shooting gallery to, finally, "shoot" my longed-for prize. However, as it happened, this was a time when I was

struggling with, as we put it today, a temporary lack of financial liquidity." I had probably lost all my pocket money on games of "blowing" or "throwing". The Wheel of Fortune, or rather our small fortune, used to turn then at breakneck speed. Gambling flourished among the boys from our street, so sometimes we would be rich, only to fall back into misery several times a day. Fortunately, payday was approaching, and my father would always give me some money on this day.

I waited all afternoon for him to come back from work – from the "grind" – as one would say then. I was waiting, meaning: sitting on a grey granite kerb, staring down the road where his silhouette was to appear. Short, stocky, stubby, with a suitcase stuffed with tools. My expectation was not free from anxiety. Payday on our street had its rituals. Fathers often came back – as one would say then – "towed." It's quite an accurate term, indeed, they were sometimes "towed" by "mates from the grind." Mates who, as it seemed, needed some assistance in navigating themselves, or at least some repairs to their gyroscopes. Some of them tacked alone, without any tender, friendly support. Over them all, no matter if they were returning home alone or together, an aura floated, a clear and distinct idea, unshaken, yet probably only foggily outlined in their heads: to get home, to get back home no matter the cost. Oftentimes, it was probably the last more or less registered thought in their frayed-with-a-vodka-typhoon heads. Odysseuses of the sixties! The last reef that they could run aground on was Pedraszko's shop: a green booth at the end of the street, where you could drink some beer. The owner, Mr Pedraszko, had only one eye, a stiff leg – maybe artificial from the knee down – and a limp left hand. Hidden in the darkness, he wielded power over his

cave. How he was able to see anything, having only one eye, in the darkness of this little shop – that I do not know. With his one hand he would charge clients, give the change and uncap the bottles late into the night, and around the kiosk there would be a wreath of castaways who thought that nothing could harm them so close to port, and certainly one more small beer could not pose a threat. Pedraszko traded in this dangerous illusion of a safe harbour's proximity. To our mothers he was the embodiment of all evil, a lot more dangerous than the inexpensive nymphs left somewhere far away in the city – tramway Zocha, Crooked Gienia or Black Ada. To us, the boys from the street, one-eyed, one-armed and one-legged Mr Pedraszko was fascinating. After all, with that first beer drunk and bought with his first self-earned money – a beer drunk with the curtain lifted up, so to speak, in front of his father – a boy became a man and could afford all the other promises of life.

Father returned late, when the light of the gas lamps had started to blend with the dusk, and the swifts above the street were crying out their nightly warnings. He came back beautifully, tanking like a towboat: short, stocky, his entire silhouette leaning slightly forward, the "stink eye" look, his arms spread to the sides like two stabilisers helping him find some mysterious, invisible anchor in this liquid-state world.

When I walked into the apartment after him, my father, recognising my mum's face and probably realizing that the time of his wanderings was over at last, collapsed on his back on the couch with a heavy sigh: "Oh Jesus! Zosia!"

Councillor G. stopped to light another cigarette.

"And?" I cut in. "No pocket money and shooting?"

“Oh no, no,” he answered vigorously. “Quite the opposite. I got plenty of pocket money from my mum who, right after my father had, let’s say, retired for the evening, proceeded with a thorough inspection of his pockets and wallet in order to determine the losses and profits. She must have been extremely pleased because I received as much as ten zlotys – two “fishermen”. Remember those coins? On the heads there was a fisherman pulling an empty net. I always searched for the sun on those five-zloty coins. Mum used to say that on some of them there was a rising sun next to the fisherman. Unfortunately, I never found such a coin. With this small fortune I could, if I remember correctly, fire five rounds, three shots each – and not to the target, but for



the prizes. So I rushed through the emptying streets where overhead the swifts were performing their last loops of the evening. I was under the impression that I was the only person heading for the funfair, that everybody else was returning to their homes. Indeed, when I got there, the funfair was almost completely lifeless. The merry-go-

rounds were motionless, empty, reminding me of abandoned scaffolding. The big wheel seemed to draw a huge target range, its circle enveloping the black ground, the yellow city lights and the stars – luminous little punctures – that appeared in a sky filled with shot.

The square where constantly colliding bumper cars usually rushed was immersed in twilight and all the vehicles were parked in one corner. All the machines that produced

joyful childhood dreams were hidden in dimness. The whole place looked like one huge scrapyard. Only the shooting gallery was still alight. A little theatre, and yet an entire world, in which the drama of my dreams, my uncertainties, and my unclear but deep desires had been playing out all summer. Somebody was still shooting! Every now and then the characteristic *pookshh pookshh* sound of lead shot meeting the back wall of the gallery rang in the air. Jana, Jana, Jana wasn't closing yet! She was sitting on the counter of the shooting gallery with her head down and her arms folded untidily on her knees. When I came closer, I recognised in the person shooting the familiar silhouette of Zdenek – the merry-go-rounds operator. He reloaded and shot, over and over again. He didn't take his time to aim. He wasn't even aiming at the sticks which, if shot, guaranteed a prize. He was shooting at the prizes themselves! Jagged fans, perforated lollipops, a teddy bear with a shot-out eye, a mirror with a crack which resembled a spider's net and with a black hole in the very middle, which somehow held on to the firm curves of Rachel Welch in a topless costume. I stood there, stunned.

"Zdenek, please, stop. Zdenek, please," Jana kept repeating without raising her head. "I'm sorry, Zdenek, I'm sorry."

Zdenek turned around to face her and noticed me standing partially hidden in the shadows. "Come here, kid," he called, or rather growled. His air gun pointed at me, as if he wanted to shoot me like one of the little teddy bears. He was staggering. It was obvious that he was very drunk. "Already closed," Jana tried to stop me. When she looked up I noticed that she had been crying. That was the first time I looked her straight in the eye...

Councillor G. fell silent, clearly hesitating as to whether he should share these shreds of priceless memories with me.

"They were green," he stated crisply and then added softly, "green like drops of morning dew on the grass." The Councillor went quiet, clearly embarrassed by his poetic comparison. However, after a short while he continued his story:

"Legs wide apart, Zdenek stood there swaying his hips sideways like John Wayne. 'It's open, it's open, come and give it a shot' he roared. 'It's our last night here. We're leaving tomorrow. It's the night of goodbyes. Right, Jana? Tonight you're going to shoot for free, kid. Huh, Jana? Special guest gets it for free? Yeah, Jana? Sometimes you like to hand it out to people for free, huh?'

Jana buried her face in her hands. She was sobbing. Zdenek growled in a drunken, slurred voice. 'And if you shoot well, kid, maybe you'll get Jana as your reward! Yeah, Jana? Delightful Jana for a delightful shooter! The best advertisement for our business. Surefire success. We're going to be rich! We're going to be happy!'"

Councillor G. stopped abruptly. He was visibly moved.

"I ran off," he said silently after a short break. "I ran away. The Czech funfair has never returned to us since. The Station Square, as you know, has been carefully measured, estimated, and then bought and sold, sold and bought many times. Every time at a profit."

"I thought that you were the owner at some point too," I interjected.

"No, never," he replied quietly, smiling. "I have always been afraid that if I ever bought the funfair square, I wouldn't be able to sell it on. And as you know, that would

be a disaster for a property dealer."

The Councillor laughed heartily.

"All in all, everything can be bought and sold, even dreams, even illusions and disappointments," he said, putting down the empty glass. "Although the latter are quite difficult to measure, and even more difficult to pack. But of course, that's what specialists are for."

When we left "The Angels" I gazed up at the lighted cathedral tower.

"It's got late, the time of the swifts has passed," said the Councillor.

The bats were circling against the backdrop of the dark navy sky, under bright twinkling dots of stars. Whitewashed by the floodlights, they flew in disorderly circles.

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