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Extract from the novel *Zimowla*

Or perhaps it has started when they cut me in half?

I remember that I was only able to move my head. Next to me lay Magda, whom I didn't know at the time, but I heard about her from Grandmother Sarecka (who had already left me her grandmotherly estate by then). Above my head I could see the dado of the sports hall, the dirty ceiling, the tissue paper rosettes, the letters cut out of styrofoam. Somewhere at the back there was a screen covered with navy blue fabric with foil stars all over it. They looked like yellow splodges. PE teacher Baniowski's board with exercise instructions filled with figures halted mid-mechanical-move. A man who was cutting us, panting, as if it were a really gruelling job. His breath smelled foul. He touched my head before he started sawing. He had a toothed saw in his hand. My father was in the audience, he took time off work especially for this, and he was clapping with delight. I tried to look down, I wanted to see what the saw was doing to my body, but the view was obstructed by the edge of the wooden box from which only my head was sticking out. The rest was kind of not there.

When the man finished, he took a piece of paper – a regular sheet of paper – and slipped it into the slit, into the incision mark, and this sheet – I could distinctly feel it – flitted straight through me, dropped to the floor and skidded across the parquet as far as the feet of the audience.

When it was all over I found out that we were chosen because of our shoes: Magda and I both had the same green plimsolls which, for some reason, mattered in the trick presented in our primary school by the travelling magician, who was gigging in provincial educational establishments to make some money.

My father, when I told him the day before that I needed money for the ticket, got strangely excited. At that time he was still hoping to find an opportunity to experience any “real miracle”.

So I wasn't surprised when the following day I saw him nudging his way forward through a crowd of small kids. Clearly thrilled, he sat on a bench which was too low for him. His knees went all the way to his chin. He had lied at work that I was unwell and he needed to take me to the doctor's.

The magician was wearing a tailcoat made of shiny fabric and had a lopsided top hat on his head. When he announced the most important trick in the programme – cutting a human being in half – and asked for “willing volunteers”, almost all hands shot up. Today I can't remember anymore if I did volunteer, I think I didn't, because I was staring in embarrassment at my father, who was also waving his hand in the air, with some peculiar tenacity on his face, as if he really cared deeply to be chosen by the magician.

One of the teachers pushed an anxious pupil forward, but the magician shook his head and shouted, “Ladies and gentlemen, dear audience, this time I would like to invite girls to come forward! Two brave girls!”

This was embraced by the audience, because at the time they were showing *Copperfield's* shows on TV, and indeed, it was always women who got cut in half. The magician looked keenly around, as if searching for something or somebody specific, and then, before I knew what was going on, he grabbed me by the hand and pulled me into the centre of the room.

I like to think that it has started with being cut in half.

I had watched Magda for a long time in the school corridors, but she didn't seem to notice it at all. I think I was most fascinated with her thin, cotton gloves, which she never took off.

The Dygnar girl was in a different class than I was. She probably didn't even remember me. After all when she was being cut in half, she wasn't even looking in my direction.

But still, when we met a few months later in front of the school nurse's room, she looked at me with such attention, that I blushed.

“You are bleeding from your nose.”

Instinctively I touched my face. Redness on my fingers. I tilted my head backwards.

“It's nothing. It'll stop soon. I have an apple for it.”

“An apple?”

“Yes, my father gives me special ones for anemia,” I muttered, embarrassed. I reached inside my backpack pocket and took out a punctured, blackened apple. “He read it somewhere that this is the best way to supplement one’s iron levels. He sticks lots of nails into an apple and leaves them overnight. In the morning he takes them out. The iron from the nails gets into the apple.”

“That sounds terribly stupid.”

I nodded.

I was surprised to find Magda there with me. We were waiting for our 10 Years health check-ups, but Magda was a year above us. Only later I found out that the Dygnar girl had started school a year early.

We entered the room in pairs.

The nurse in a white coat awaited inside. She had a pile of forms on the desk in front of her. She needed to write down our height and weight, check our vision, curvature of the spine, flat-footedness, immunisation schedule.

Next to the desk there was a glazed cabinet with dark little bottles inside. Medical column scales. A screen. A couch covered with brown leatherette with a crumpled sheet over it.

“Come on, girls. Chop, chop, let’s get undressed! Take everything off, only leave your panties on!” She pointed to the screen.

I followed Magda and suddenly felt just like then, a few months before, when we were both behind an almost identical screen and the dodgy magician was putting us into two wooden trunks. By the wall, hidden from the eyes of the audience, lay messy cables, extensions, unneeded, gutted magic trick-boxes with open catches, wands erupted with streamers, fake pigeons, overcoats turned inside out and waistcoats with lots of hidden pockets. I stared at what even a moment ago, from the other end of the sports hall, seemed to be so extraordinary and now turned into several tatty, cheap props. The magician himself, seen from a short distance, was a completely different man. His shiny tailcoat reeked of old sweat. The man looked tired and irritated. He had loads of tiny blackheads all over his nose, as if somebody pricked his skin with a needle.

“Come on, darling. There is no time,” he pushed me towards the trunk. “Come on, darling. There is no time,” the nurse chirped.

I started taking my turtleneck off and, of course, my head got stuck in it. I couldn’t manage, I jerked hard, but was only getting more and more entangled and felt like I was about to suffocate. Can one get strangled by their own pullover? I was worried that my nose might start bleeding again. Suddenly I felt somebody’s hands, somebody was gently but decisively untangling the sleeves and pulling at the turtleneck until the pullover slid off my head and I, all red, could take a deep breath.

“Thanks,” I muttered to Magda, who smiled and said nothing.

She had taken her jeans and t-shirt off and was standing in front of me in her blue knickers covered with teeny flowers and her light gloves. She didn’t cover herself, she waited straight-backed to be called by the nurse. Magda’s breasts were already protruding slightly, just like mine; it had started shortly before. As if something laid eggs under our skins, which now grew and if I touched myself there, despite the pain, I could feel a hard pit covered with very thin flesh. That’s when I stopped wearing white t-shirts, because dark circles of nipples were visible through the closer-fitting ones.

When the Dygnar girl moved towards the scales while the nurse adjusted the tubular weights as if it were some kind of special abacus for weighing meat carcasses, I had a good look at Magda’s back – already then with a dropped shoulder blade sticking out like some sharp knife – and her undefined waist. I was looking – I suddenly realised and felt bad about it – for the scar from the cut. I wanted to make sure that there was indeed no mark there, no line, not even a scratch; that the skin, the flesh, the whole of Magda remained intact.

All of a sudden I felt my knickers going wet, as if I peed myself. Petrified, I hid behind the screen and touched the fabric with the wetness slowly soaking through.

I started coming to see the nurse more often since I had finally got my first period: soon after the trip with my father to the Chakra, shortly before the attack on the World Trade Center. I remember that we

all couldn't wait for our periods to arrive and as soon as one of us started menstruating, she would brag about it. Squares of pads wrapped in dark-green plastic would accidentally fall out of her backpack, menstrual calendar with dates marked in colourful markers was sticking out, supposedly by accident, from the wallet of her school ID, and at the PE lessons the 'indisposition' was immediately reported to the teacher, and in such a loud voice so that we all could hear it.

So I was also happy when I first saw a brown stain on my knickers in the bathroom, but I was soon petrified by a painful spasm which from then on took over my body every month. Once, when at school, I was in so much pain that I couldn't move, I felt like somebody took my control over my body away from me and left me with just the heavy pain gravitating downwards; from my belly button down I had nothing else. What was the most surprising was the fact that it wasn't just my belly that hurt but also my back, my anus, my crotch – as if I had been kicked there long and hard. For a moment I thought that the sheet of paper from the magician's trick is still growing in my belly, cutting it with its sharp edges.

The teacher sent me downstairs. A girlfriend helped me, because I was not able to walk down the stairs on my own. The nurse had her hours reduced recently, so she was only in on some days; luckily she was present in her room. She put me down on the couch, took a bottle out of the glazed cabinet and poured some yellow, muddy liquid into a large peg glass.

The herbs were strong, made with spirits. "Still hurts?"

I nodded.

"One more then."

I drank another glass. The heat was spreading in my stomach. It seemed like the pain was really subsiding.

"So what's your period now?"

"Polish."

"With whom?"

"With Jaskuła. The headteacher."

The nurse winced at the sound of this name. The warmth was encompassing my head. I giggled. "You can stay here until the end of the period, if you want."

The woman sent me a smile and started filling in some paperwork stacked neatly on her desk.

From then on I returned to see the nurse almost every month. Sometimes I went past other girls at the door to the nurse's room. This smiling, slightly impulsive woman emanated with some kind of peacefulness, but first and foremost its source was her wonderful elixir, this tincture, the medicine for girlish pains.

I never met Magda there again.

PART I ANTHROPOCENE

CHAPTER 1

Just before the New Year, mysterious marks in the snow started appearing in our town at nighttime.

We didn't speak about it out loud, but the marks were being found pretty much every morning in different parts of the town. They stopped weirdly and unexpectedly, so it would seem that whoever left them soared into the air all of a sudden or simply... disappeared. They led from nowhere to nowhere.

It wouldn't perhaps be all that strange (after all that winter snow covered the entirety of Cukrówka pretty much every night) if not for the fact that there were traces of human and animal mixed together. As if somebody took a huge dog for a walk, but the human feet leaving marks on the snow were bare.

As the winter progressed, we found the marks more and more often and they were denser and denser, appearing in more and more disturbing places. Scared, we always found them early in the morning. They cut through pavements and gardens, left a distinct black stitching across locked gates, entwined sturdy railings, thick walls and wobbly old fences and also – and that was what the locals found most petrifying – stopped suddenly right in front of a bedroom window or sometimes in front of a door. As if something was spying on us at night when we were asleep. Circling around our houses.

Trying to get inside.

The issue could not be ignored any longer when something else started appearing next to traces of bare feet and animal paws – tiny but distinct, dark red dots eaten into the snow: coagulated blood.

True, we tried to combat our increasing, irrational fear. What was being said more and more often was that it were wolves that came from Slovakia. (But the winter that year was mild, so why wolves? They were last seen here in 1978, during the winter of the century, and even that you couldn't be sure of). Perhaps a bear, woken up by high temperatures, wandered into the Franz Forest? Hungry foxes? Wild dogs?

Despite all those reassuring explanations hardly anyone walked alone in Cukrówka at night. And even though towns like ours tend to go completely empty in the evenings, I also remember very well that at the beginning of 2005 we stayed indoors after dark for other reasons than the regular nighttime provincial emptiness.

Nobody said it out loud but we all knew it: there was a werewolf in Cukrówka.

Misza licked his fingers and carefully handed me the freshly opened bottle of sparkling wine.

Like every Saturday we were supposed to play the king of the hill, but Hans was running late. Misza and I sat on top of the highest local hill. The entirety of Cukrówka stretched at our feet, this town of three Zmornica miracles. We could see our houses from here: the Sarecka's villa and the Glass House, as well as the grey monolith of the municipal office and the leaning tower by the church of Our Lady of Mount Carmel. On the eastern side of the hill there was a cemetery and on the western – the woods, the Forest, tightly surrounding the Valley up until the old Works. The bend of the Zmornica River glimmered through the thicket behind our backs. To the east, outside of the town, there was a straight line of the main road Kraków

– Wadowice – Wysoka and beyond that; the same road which – though we didn't know it yet – Misza would take to escape forever, on the day when my father would disappear in the shoe cupboard and I would finally find the Inka treasure.

I took a long swig and immediately choked.

"Where is he?" Misza was getting impatient.

He used the end of his lighter to do some nervous digging in the soggy ground. The grass was only starting to get green on the hill.

"Give him a call."

"I don't have enough top-up on my card. They probably don't want to sell him..." He sighed. "I could have gone myself."

He was the only one in our trio who was over eighteen years of age.

I shrugged my shoulders, stealthily hiding my yawn. Misza pretended not to notice. I hadn't slept much for two weeks.

We didn't tell anybody about what happened that night at the beginning of April.

We should really report it somewhere, I thought with embarrassment. It would be safer for all concerned. I tapped my fingers on the dark-green glass bottle.

At the same moment a phone vibrated loudly. Misza flipped it open with one move of his wrist and showed me the message on the screen without saying a word. 'ALLOTMENTS. QUICK'. I shook my head helplessly.

It seemed that our friend Hans went completely mad.

The Cukrówka allotments were located in the north-west, not far from the Forest; they were a peculiar jungle of reality, as if they were a barricade erected between the town and the woods pressing on it.

Cut by a maze of fences, enclosures, ways, paths and trails, cluttered with arbours, summer houses, improvised barbecues, sheds, shacks, greenhouse tents, overgrown with a vast amount of vegetable plots, patches, flower beds, trees and bushes, the allotments seemed to be devoid of any spacial logic. Even when taking the same path for years you could still easily get lost here and helplessly look for a way out, especially after dark (though of course now nobody in town would dare to go there at night).

Hans' father bought his allotment as soon as he got back to the country, tempted by exceptionally good price. He quickly discovered that there was a reason for the low price – having the Beekeeper and his bees as neighbours made life so difficult that Mr Dariusz very quickly gave up on organising boozy barbecues for his friends there and several weeks lately completely forgot about owning any land in Cukrówka.

Before Misza came up with the idea for the king of the hill game, we spent almost every weekend on Hans' allotment. Very rarely did we see the Beekeeper. Several times he kicked fuss about the smoke making his bees drowsy, but most of the time he spent locked in his falling apart little house with curtains drawn tightly. In fact up until the events of the beginning of spring we didn't pay him any attention.

"Quiet!!!" We heard Hans' irritated whisper from the bushes.

I shut the squeaky gate with care. The allotment was small, with a patchy, unkempt hedge growing along its borders. There was a wooden arbour in the corner and in front of it – some dirty chairs and a cracked table made of plastic that used to be white. Old cans were scattered on the grass, as well as soggy bags with last bits of charcoal.

"Did you get it?" Misza crawled into the hedge with some difficulty. He was much taller than Hans, he had to hunker very low to fit into the hole under the hedge.

"What?" Hans didn't even look at us. He kept pushing his face against a gap in a very tall, but not very neatly put together fence. In his naivety his father hoped that the fence would shelter him from the stench coming, as he claimed, from above the Beekeeper's land, as well as prevent the lost bees from coming over, dropping into sweet drinks and annoying guests who had to chase them away.

"Sovetskoye Igristoye. Did you buy it?"

Hans waved his hand casually. There was a plastic bag with two bottles and a packet of fags lying on the lawn. I picked it up and wedged myself into the bushes next to the boys. Misza took a small packet wrapped in foil from his pocket and started skilfully crumbling weed for a joint.

"Good stuff. From the Slovak woman. Not like last time," he mumbled reassuringly when he noticed the doubtful look I sent him.

For a moment all you could hear was rustling of crumbled weed. I often got some of Misza's stuff for myself, he sold it to me a bit cheaper than to the others. Sometimes I liked to try some strange things, but mainly I just smoked pot. Hans bought rarely, usually just took what Misza was offering – mainly because he barely ever had any money and the young Masztalerz didn't want to run a tab, even for friends.

"And...?" I couldn't stop myself.

Hans must have sensed irritation in my voice, because he finally turned towards us. "I saw him again."

I regretted telling him about the strange visitor in my mother's museum a few weeks back. That was why he started hanging out on the allotment.

"He had a shovel and a backpack with him. Just like, you know... then. He popped into a shop for a moment, but first hid everything in the bushes. Probably didn't want guys from the Works to see. There were about four of them at the table..." Hans stopped and looked with uncertainty at Misza. After all his father too used to work in the Works. But Misza was typing something on his phone and didn't seem to be listening to Hans at all. "He went to the Forest."

"Why didn't you follow him?"

Hans looked evidently sheepish. He took a half-smoked joint from me and drew in slowly. No, he wasn't scared of the Beekeeper. But he still preferred not to be with him on his own.

“He would have noticed me.” He shrugged his shoulders. “But instead I peeked into his backpack.” “And?”

Hans took another puff. Suddenly he went red and started coughing violently. He quickly grabbed the open bottle. He took a long swig and the sparkling wine dripped down his chin and onto his t-shirt.

“It was empty,” he finally rasped with reluctance, pretending not to notice my irritated gaze. “The old man was probably just going to buy something.”

He wiped his mouth with his hand, then gave me the joint and again pushed his face against the gap in the fence.

Hans thought that something had been hidden in our town. And that the old Makowski knew what it was.

Two weeks earlier, one night at the beginning of April, we saw the Beekeeper from the top of the hill. Carrying a backpack and a shovel covered in mud, he was walking along the road towards the Forest. He didn't notice us. He kept looking back, as if scared that somebody might be following him. And indeed, at some point we thought we saw a silhouette in a dark coat by the turn of the road, next to the Our Lady of the Martial Law. But this phantom immediately disappeared in the folds of the shadow created by the statue in dim light of a streetlamp. After all the old man was a weirdo, a geriatric nutter. Stoned with weed that was too strong, we watched with little interest as Makowski turned towards the allotments and disappeared in the darkness.

I thought I knew why Hans clung to this story about the Beekeeper. It allowed him to pretend that he simply did not remember what happened afterwards.

And when you don't remember something, it's almost as if it has never happened.

The Beekeeper was an elderly man of undetermined age. If I were to guess, I would say that at the time, in 2005, he was about seventy-five years old, or at least that was what he looked like.

Average height, rather stocky, as a young man he must have been broad-shouldered and well-built; now all that was left of it was old-age obesity. He wore glasses in distinctive frames with a double, semicircular bridge that made you think of shining blades. Below his purplish lips a thinned out beard protruded, into which bits of food often got stuck. A peaked cap sat on top of his dirty hair. The hair, always a bit too long and unevenly cut, had an ugly colour of matte grey; it was greasy, straggly and stuck to his forehead. As a result Makowski looked as if he was always sweaty. A peculiar, unpleasant smell surrounded him too – according to Hans he “smelled of an old codger”. A sour smell of unwashed body, dankness and something like wet soil emanated from his allotment. Once, when he again brought honey to Wosiowa's shop for sale, the shopkeeper wanted to discreetly gift him a deodorant, but he refused in a rude way, telling her that “all such smells irritate bees”. And perhaps that was indeed the explanation of all this mystery.

On a daily basis Makowski wore a grey, stained terry cloth bathrobe which he used as if it were a coat – he usually threw it over a brushed cotton shirt, sometimes over a pullover ridden with holes. Quite a bit of his belly protruded from under the bathrobe – it was so big in fact that the shirt could be barely buttoned up and sometimes between the buttons you could see his pale skin the colour of cheese covered with black, curly hairs. Whenever we saw him, he always wore the same, dirty clothes and only in wintertime they were supplemented by a puffer jacket reaching to his waist, with the bathrobe sticking out from underneath like a dress.

The strangest though were his shoes. Makowski wore grey, threadbare socks and slippers – a pair of regular, felt, slip-on slippers, which he wore all year round. They say his legs swelled badly and he could only manage shoes of this kind. Or at least that's what he complained about to Wosiowa. When it rained more, he put plastic bags over his slippers and tied them carefully around his ankles.

The Beekeeper rarely left his plot of land and if he did, he always walked very fast, he almost ran in a heavy trot, so that the belt of the bathrobe fluttered behind him like a cow's tail and his slippers flapped against his heels. Considering his age he must have been pretty fit. During those excursions he propped himself with a stick (he always had it with him), which, with every step he took, he pounded into the pavement with force and you could think that in a moment he might produce real sparks from the

Cukrówka ground.

We sat for a long time on the slightly wet grass. The cold permeated from beneath. My legs were starting to go numb, but the warmth of the Russian champagne was slowly spreading all over my body. Despite it being late afternoon, the sun was very warm, getting through the shaggy, unkempt hedge covered with fresh leaf buds. A bee got entangled in it, drowsy and slow, tempted by the sweet smell of the wine. It hovered heavily by our faces, just like the flicker of the lighter which we lifted every now and then to light Misza's joints and our own cigarettes. The longer we sat there without a word (Hans kept shushing us when we tried to have a conversation), the louder the hum of a dozen or so beehives spread haphazardly on the neighbouring plot seemed to be. It surprised me. I had been there many times before but never noticed it. The sound was increasing, at first it was like a soft humming, a barely audible rustling, but now it filled my head. I felt like with every puff of smoke inhaled into my lungs my whole body was glowing-hot for a moment with this disturbingly familiar purring, with this huge swarm, and all of a sudden I burst out laughing, because I remembered, completely nonsensically, that we shouldn't be sitting on the grass. The first spring thunderstorm had not happened yet. My father always used to say that you are allowed to sit on the ground only after the first lightning draws out all evil gathered in the soil over winter.

More and more sleepy, I noticed a lost bee walking along Misza's dirty thumb. The insect crawled onto the bottle and was now climbing its dark-green neck, finally it swayed on its edge and dropped inside. Surprised, I watched the bee dipping into the remains of the sweet liquid and go under, I watched it scramble slowly, sluggishly, lethargically, as if it didn't care at all that it was about to lose its life. I watched it, I

couldn't look away, it reminded me of something, it awoke some unclear foreboding feeling, this bee suspended in Russian bubbly like in a tiny piece of amber: it was a stubborn feeling that I should remember something...

I must have dozed off, because I jumped up at the sound of a loud curse. Misza had noticed the drowned bee. Upset, he violently shook the bottle, as if it could help him or the insect.

"Quiet...!" We suddenly heard Hans' nervous whisper. Misza froze with his arm raised up. "HE'S COMING!"

We could see the Beekeeper through the gaps in the fence. He was slowly unwinding a bundle of wire which played a role of a lock on his shabby gate. I watched him with worry. Even though many years had passed, I hadn't forgotten what he did to Zojka. The old Makowski entered into his yard, but instead of going straight to the house, he dropped his backpack onto the ground with some effort and, holding the shovel in his hand, he quickly approached the tree in the corner of the cluttered garden. The tails of his dirty bathrobe flailed about between his legs.

"What is he doing?" Baffled Misza was staring at Makowski.

"I think... he is counting steps," I answered with hesitation.

The man stood with his back to the tree and, mumbling under his nose, he carefully counted a dozen or so steps. He turned left, walked several metres further and stopped. He started digging with his back towards us. It wasn't easy, so every now and then he took a break, took his dirty peaked cap off and brushed his sweaty grey hair with his hand. Despite his quite an imposing posture, he was at the age when physical exertion must have come with an effort. We could hear his heavy panting on the other side of the fence.

It went on for several minutes. Suddenly the Beekeeper threw his shovel to the side, knelt down and carefully raked the soil with his hands. A moment later he grabbed something into his closed fist and put it in his pocket. He got up with obvious difficulty, brushed his dirty trousers, picked up his abandoned backpack and started towards his make-shift dacha turned into a year-round home. The door shut behind him with a squeak.

"Did you see?!" Excited Hans turned to us.

But before any of us had a chance to answer, the Beekeeper reappeared – holding a huge jar of home-made honey. He sat on the front steps, his huge, thick hands grabbed and twisted the lid of the jar open with some difficulty. He looked around carefully, as if to make sure he was on his own. He didn't spot us, cowered on the other side of the fence. He reached into his pocket. We held our breaths.

Makowski was holding a large key with a carved bow.

He cleaned it of the remains of soil on the edge of his dirty bathrobe and started studying it with attention against the light: he brought it close to his eyes and then moved it away at the length of his arm. It seemed like he was looking straight at the sun through the hole in the bow of the key, like he was studying light reflecting in the golden metal. Suddenly it seemed like he remembered something.

He quickly took the open jar of honey and in one move dropped the key in it.

We watched with fascination. The key was dropping slowly, struggling to get through the thick, almost set liquid. It looked like the honey was devouring the key, like the key was melting, liquifying, dissolving... and then it was gone. Makowski shook the jar. For a moment I thought that the honey reflected the light of the setting sun and glimmered, that the Beekeeper had a mirror in his hands, not a piece of glass. I blinked. The light went off. The old man quickly twisted the jar lid close. Holding it tight, he went inside and shut the door.

CHAPTER 2

In fact I still don't know how this story has started.

Was it in the year of the Martial Law miracle? On the day when Misha came up with the hill idea? Or perhaps when my father started tallying sins? When my grandmother disappeared? When she had a dream about the bayonet? When I ate the Bible and my mother turned into a mermaid...?

There are days when I am almost certain that it all started on the second of April.

That was when we saw the Beekeeper covered in mud, coming back from the Forest (even though it wasn't about him after all).

We were celebrating Misza's approaching birthday. I remember that there was a *halny* wind at nighttime – the same *halny* which stupefied the security service souls bewitched into hens and made my father – awaiting the end of the world – restless.

We stayed until late on the hill and it was after midnight when we were coming back home. All because the moped had broken down. Misza couldn't go across the border to Slovakia, as usual, so instead got some strange weed from a friend in Wysoka. It must have been drenched with something to cheat on its weight. It muddled us so badly that the poor Hans puked. That was why we were coming back so late.

We were surrounded by unreal howling of the windstorm going through the Valley. Swirls of air were suffocating us, as if we were lost in the midst of some invisible snowdrift. The streets, empty at this time of night, were covered with melting snow, the last bits of it from a sudden return of winter a few days before. Every now and then we sunk into darkness between sparse lamps lining the street. Their dim, yellow light hung in the hazy air and I felt as if the wind was forcefully pushing clumps of this glow into my mouth and nose, as if it were cotton wool.

We walked fast, the wind was getting stronger and stronger. Frosted puddles shattered under our feet. The howling of the wind turned into a hollow rumble and I was suddenly terrified that the storm might grab me, lift me from the ground, take me up, above the town and throw me far above the Valley. For a moment I felt like in 1994, when my father took me to see Jaruzelski's window and I floated above the pavement like a balloon fastened to my dad's hand.

Even though we didn't believe in stupid whispers spreading in the town, we still felt uneasy walking on our own through empty Cukrówka. It might have been the effect of the poor quality drug, or perhaps it was the *halny* wind, blowing with unprecedented strength, but we kept looking around anxiously. I noticed that every few metres nervous Hans looked back. At some point all three of us, without a reason, quickened our steps. Misza was ahead, I and Hans kept trying to catch up with him. "Madmen are born when the *halny* blows," my grandmother used to say when she had to go out in such weather to check the ropes on her hens' necks. She tied them in the autumn to stop the hens from trying to fly away with wild birds. And

grandmother was always right. I realised I was almost running. I swallowed hard. My throat was dry. The air was forcing its way into my mouth, it was lashing at my eyes.

And then, without any warning, Misza stopped.

"What the...?" irritated Hans started, but was cut short, because Misha, terribly pale, raised his hand and pointed his finger to the ground.

We had heard about them, but we had never seen them before.

Traces, clear and dark, left on the thin layer of whiteness. They went across the snow and mud, looped around, turned and twisted, zigzagged, so that you could not tell if the thing that had left them behind was gone or only just arrived. They were exactly like we were told: traces of wolf's shaggy paws left in the snow as well as footprints of long, slim feet with toes spread wide. They continued along the road, as far as I could see in the dotted, soggy light of street lamps.

I strained my eyes.

A few dozen metres away from us, like some culmination of the coiling sets of prints, a murky shape loomed in the dark.

Long fur tousled in the strong wind. Crouching low, it looked like it was slowly creeping towards us, baring its teeth.

"Oh, fuck," I heard Misza's whisper.

Hans jerked backwards, almost knocking us down. I barely managed to keep my balance. The creature froze. It noticed us. And then... wagged its tail.

"It's Coconut, you idiots!" I laughed out loud, barely able to hide my relief. "You don't recognise your own dog?"

Coconut, offspring of our Zojka, was a medium-sized mongrel, but he had really thick paws. We should have figured it out way earlier. Misza's dog liked wandering around on its own, sometimes disappearing for days at a time. Somebody inexperienced could have easily taken its traces for wolf's ones.

I tried calling the dog. It didn't pay me any attention. It was fidgeting in the fold of light, every now and then entering the yellow circle of the glow. I started looking for a stick. Coconut loved sticks. I bent down, parting rotten leaves on the side of the road with my foot.

I felt Hans yanking my arm. Both him and Misza were still staring intently into a dark bend of the road.

A woman was following the dog. I only spotted her now.

"She... she is naked," Misza stuttered.

To my horror I realised that blood was dripping down the insides of the girl's thighs. Her bare feet were leaving familiar, darkening traces in the remains of the snow. She was walking towards us. Her eyes were shut tight.

"She is asleep!" I whispered in a sudden flash of understanding. "Your dog is keeping an eye on her."

Suddenly the girl and Coconut in front of her turned into one of the yards. She spattered the puddles with her bare feet and disappeared behind one of the houses. All that was left were deep, black footprints, the same footprints that have rid Cukrówka of peaceful sleep for so many weeks.

We stared at each other, dumbfounded. None of us was able to say a word. The wind died down and we were now surrounded by unnatural silence. We could only hear our own quickened breaths. Following a vague impulse I looked up.

Above our heads, on the top of a steep roof of a random house stood Magda.

[...]

Translated from the Polish by Anna Blasiak