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PROLOGUE:
A COUPLE IS DANCING

IT HAD GOTTEN LATE in Piękny Pies, a club in Krakow's Old Town, which translates as "beautiful dog." The cold was pushing its way in through the drafty door. I was sitting at the bar; a guest reached his arm in above my shoulder and carried away two vodkas. The staff here seemed capable of doing everything at once: washing dishes, working the register, tapping beer, which tasted mild, even smooth: Żywiec. The earth moved. From one moment to the next, when they stopped playing the charts and put on the tango, the Polish tango, and the club slipped back into a distant past. A couple got up from the table. She, not all that young anymore, heavily

made up. Her partner, bearded; when he smiled his gold tooth glistened in the club lighting.

Kayah, the Polish singer, sang of tobacco, of unhealthy smoke that filled also this club. A slow tango, almost stately. It was only a few years old, as I later found out, a retro piece, but it sounded like it had been recorded in the twenties. Accompanied by a cello, Kayah sang, “Leave the tobacco pouch here, let me keep it forever as a sign of your love.” – “Na zawsze zostaw, jak znak miłośći twojej.” “Let the tobacco poison me slowly.” – “Niech truje mnie powoli.”

I didn’t like the situation I had gotten into. A couple dancing in a club and music that carried a good shot of that mood replete with tobacco, love, and death. It seduces you into being sentimental. And I had long since gotten used to a certain detachment that I don’t want to call German, but that is in fact where its roots are. The 1990s, at the latest, finished off any of life’s moods that you could lose yourself in. Every statement is a quotation, every bit of joy is infiltrated with irony, every ounce of mourning is covered over by coolness. But it was too late for any rearguard action; I had lapsed into a kitschy touch of pub romance and let it happen.

And although I didn’t understand a thing about music, I got the drift of the tango immediately: It was a dance of dissimilar timing, of divergent movements, of closeness and distance, of departure and return. Sometimes the man stood motionless for a few seconds while the woman continued dancing. And for a moment—you had to hold on to the image—the woman threw back her head, her wrinkled countenance, and she laughed out loud, like frozen happiness. Then the couple danced again in unison, with eager and yet controlled clutches, mournful and liberated at once.

A man whose name I have since forgotten was sitting next to me at the bar; he was—as he himself said—“a lost soul.” He told me a story. Confusing, a disordered puzzle; the fragments formed more or less the following picture: His parents were so rich, real estate brokers, and he was so poor, that he had a falling out with them and now he went from one pub to the next, day in, day out, and one day, yeah, one day, he repeated, he would move away forever. To Canada, to Canada. And he said he

was unhappy and lonely. He was big, had shoulder-length black hair, was between thirty and forty years old—you couldn't really tell exactly—he laughed; he took a long chug of Żywiec. The man spent the entire evening pouring beer down his throat; it shot in like a waterfall on bare stones. Then he looked down at me with glazed eyes. The couple danced past us.

I told him that I planned to write a book about Poland. He nodded; he wasn't listening. I told him that I had left Poland a long time ago, that for a long time I didn't want to hear anything about the country. That I used to be ashamed of being a Pole in Germany, because of the image that Germans had of Poles. And it took a long time, not until now—at thirty-one—did I set out to rediscover it for myself.

He looked at me without a word.

"Polski tango, a beautiful Polski tango," I said to him, to escape the silence that had settled between us. "No," he responded, shaking his head slowly, "It's Polskie tango, Polskie tango."

He corrected me a lot in the course of that evening, a strict teacher. My Polish was fluent, it got more and more fluent the more I drank, but I got the endings all mixed up, the seven Polish cases, the genders and conjunctions had all started living an unbridled life of their own in my Polish. It was hopeless. I could make myself understood, but everyone knew immediately that I was from Germany. There I was often "the Pole," despite my German passport, and in Poland I became known from then on as "the German." There was one question that stubbornly followed me around on my trip: Whether I would root for Germany or Poland during the soccer World Cup. Each time I shrugged my shoulders awkwardly, joking my way around an answer.

Kayah continued singing about tobacco. And the couple was indefatigable, dancing past us again, almost touching us.

“Tango,” said my neighbor sitting at the bar, “is neuter.” And that was his final word. His head sank down onto the counter, his eyes half closed. Like he was dead, I thought for a moment, but his breath was soft and heavy.

Black, burned bile pouring out into the blood. That’s how people used to imagine melancholy taking hold of someone, the pleasure of being sad. “Na zawsze zostaw, jak znak miłośći twojej” – “Leave the tobacco pouch here,” Kayah sang, “Let me keep it forever as a sign of your love.” They were still dancing. “Niech truje mnie powoli.” – “Let the tobacco poison me slowly.” And I looked around the club and the other guests were looking at the couple that could not stop dancing, that had intoxicated itself.

I smiled. Not entirely sober myself, I had landed in the middle of my own story. In a story of dissimilar timing, of the divergent life stories on this side and that side of the Oder. I was in pursuit of the past. I had to catch up to it, knowing of course that no one can catch up to the past. Only its reflection shines forth for moments from layers of time thought long lost, and yet it remains so distant, like a spirit you reach out to grasp, but it is futile: Your hand reaches right through it. Memory is related to lying, bedazzling, disguising. It is alive, it haunts, draws us away, usually unprepared. It tears us out of the time in which we are living, throwing us forcibly into a storm of images.

I had set out to see people again whom I had not seen for years, even decades, set out through my own past. I would meet Grażyna, my first childhood sweetheart in my hometown, and my Uncle Tadek, who on summer nights in a small village in the Masurian Lakeland told me about thieves who stole geese. I would write about my grandfather, who secretly distilled vodka in the kitchen. And about us moving away from Poland, my parents and me, to seek our fortune in Germany. I would write about that first, for the sake of the chronology, about my first steps in a new country that has since become a familiar one, and Poland, a distant one.

And I would move through Warsaw, through the city scarred with communist boulevards, to explore how the beautiful new world of merchandise is making its way, unstoppable.

I would approach the present, the twins who rule the country, the Kaczyńskis. And the Polish artists, painters, and writers, too, like Tadeusz Różewicz, who once fought against the Germans with his gun at the ready. In the Uprising. I would meet Steffen Möller, who haunts his way through Polish television channels almost every evening as a German soap opera star.

And with all of that, all the thoughts about the story that lay ahead of me, I almost failed to notice:
I was already smack in the middle of it.

(…)

THE GOOD GERMAN

TWO YOUNG MEN, twins, are sitting at the kitchen table talking about their mother. She is sick and lying in bed in the next room. She is crying desperately.

“Yeah, that mother has to take these psychotropic drugs, what infernal stuff,” says one brother to the other. Loud sobbing can be heard in the background. “And it is us who really need them,” says the second brother, staring into space with infinite earnestness. The husband and father just died recently in an accident and the mother has been unstable ever since. Arduously, she lifts herself up and walks into the kitchen to her sons, staggering, doped up on serotonin reuptake inhibitors. She looks at her sons with a faraway expression. The two of them look back, bewildered.

Cut.

I had been zapping through the television channels in my room in Hotel Europejski that evening and just landed in the middle of an episode of “M jak Miłość¨” – “L as in Love.” It’s a TV series that’s on twice a week and is topping the ratings of Polish television. About ten million Poles watch it regularly.

Now we see an older gentleman. He’s very shy, sitting in a café across from a woman around forty. He stutters through his declaration of love; the woman is flattered as she listens. Finally she explains rather melodramatically that her most innermost feelings resist the liaison that he seeks. And then for three full minutes they exchange sad, very sad looks, and some reluctant tears flow. It is fate, the fickle heart, that so painfully stands in the way of love’s bliss.

Cut.

The next crisis scenario. A young man chewing gum, very laid back, with a tousled hairdo and jeans that are far too long, is secretly listening to his girlfriend’s voice mailbox on her cell phone. What he hears are declarations of love expressed by his father. His own father! He closes his eyes, covers them with his hand; a world has just collapsed. He suspected it. Now it is certain. The rich, very rich father, the father with the good manners, who runs a big Polish corporation, has deceived him. His own son! Of course his girlfriend steps into the room at that moment, also gum-chewing. She sees that her boyfriend has been tampering with her cell phone. At first she is offended, then ashamed. She guesses that her double-dealing has been discovered.

Subsequently, very long and complicated conversations at the kitchen table. The episode ends with the two of them sitting across from one another, crying. And at the very end, the credits are about to appear on the screen, they touch each other’s fingertips. Today “M jak Miłość¨” leaves viewers with a vague sense of hope.

So that is how one quarter of the TV-viewing Polish population spends two evenings a week during prime time. And I have to ask myself how Polish scriptwriters can manage to work more sadness and problems into one episode of “M jak Miłość¨” than in a year of the German “Marienhof” and “Lindenstrasse” series combined.

Someone was missing in tonight’s episode: the actor Steffen Möller. Möller plays a German, a farmer in his early thirties named Stefan Müller, who made his way to Poland because of the potatoes. He is the likable character of the series and that’s surprising of course, since Germans seldom have a positive connotation in television.

But not only does Müller constantly smile dreamily in the village café or on his field, like an ideal son-in-law, he is also the fool, the hopelessly unlucky fellow in the series, which is certainly not lacking in terrible blows of fate in any case. That explains his popularity. That is how Germans are allowed to be in Poland. Stefan Müller has already been dumped by women twice. Once it was even at the altar, when his fiancée fled the church, languishing over a long lost love of her youth. The more rejection he suffers, the more the viewers love him. With that, the series is invoking an old Polish saga: the saga of Wanda. According to legend, Wanda, daughter of the Krakow Duke Krak, ruled in Poland around 700. When the German prince Rüdiger wanted to marry her, Wanda refused, keeping a vow of chastity. So Rüdiger invaded Poland with his army and Wanda threw herself in the Vistula. Better to choose death, she thought, than marry a German prince.

So today of all days, as I watch “M jak Miłość” and slowly doze off, having become a bit melancholic myself, Stefan Müller is nowhere to be seen on the TV screen.

But the actor Steffen Möller was in fact somewhere in Warsaw. I met him the next morning in a café on Ulica Chlodna, a street bordering on the old Jewish ghetto. Candles were burning on the tables, outside it was drizzling away quietly, pedestrians cast tired looks inside. The café itself brings Berlin bistros to mind, which like this one are stuffed with retro-style furniture. Quiet beats could be heard coming from the loudspeakers, a Sunday afternoon feeling was gradually taking over. Möller cleared things up for me: The character of Stefan Müller, he said, has been on vacation in Germany for a while, but he’d be back soon. And then Müller would fall in love again. And soon afterward he would be abandoned by his new girlfriend. That’s how the character was set up, Möller said. He was the embodiment of the German failure. Möller, thirty-eight years old, dressed in a plaid shirt and corduroy slacks, looked incredibly nondescript. He wore his brown hair parted on the side, had a youthful face that gave him an aura of harmlessness, and his Polish was not accent-free, but fluent.

He moved to Warsaw in 1995. Having just completed his degree in theology and philosophy in Berlin, and not really knowing why, he signed up for a Polish language course in Warsaw. On the train ride over, he was already fascinated by this strange

language. He stared the whole time at a sign mounted next to a small lever: "Hamulec Bezpieczeństwa" - emergency brake. It sounded exotic enough to him to stay longer in this city that is only a few hours from Berlin. At the time, of course, he hadn't imagined it would turn into more than a decade. At first he taught German at the university in Warsaw. And when he walked down the streets after his classes, he mumbled away Polish words, over and over until they stuck in his head. The reason he stayed in Poland, Möller said, anticipating what people often assumed, had nothing to do with a woman. Love, that came much later.

Möller began writing down his experiences in Polish. He rehearsed a cabaret program that would quickly make him known on variety show stages. Poles loved nothing more than to be praised by foreigners. Of course they were satirically over the top in Möller's program, but always in a likable way.

And Möller performed for sell-out crowds; he talked about how terrible the Polish language is and how the Poles, aware of a long tradition of the absurd, had set themselves up with all things provisional, chaotic, and half-finished, and that this was a pleasant personality trait of theirs. Even when they made life difficult, so incredibly difficult: at the authorities, with repairmen—whose clan corruption and everyday anarchy, however, definitely enriched Möller's life.

The producers of "M jak Miłość¨" were in the audience at one of his performances and they called him a few days later. Would he like to take on a role in the series? Möller immediately said yes. And soon he was also hired for other television show genres. He moderated the Polish version of "You Bet," and a Europe Show. He even appeared in the blocks of commercials shown during the breaks: In a TV spot for the stomach disorder remedy "Ranimax," which shows him with acid indigestion. He received the Polish TV award, the Telekamera, and the German Cross of Merit award for his European dedication. Möller is in Poland what the Dutchman Rudi Carrel is in Germany.

Our conversation, which initially centered around the stations of Möller's life, was continually interrupted. Möller gave autographs whenever anyone asked. Also for a blonde, very heavily made-up, former student of the once German teacher, who

smiled as she thanked him. She sat down at a neighboring table, smoothed the rather snug orange top she was wearing, and leafed through a magazine.

Yes, said Möller, as he stretched—he was in a great mood and was beaming—he often gets fervent love letters, that’s how famous he’s gotten here. Two or three times he even went out on dates, which he quickly regretted since they immediately wanted to marry him.

He said he also gets letters regularly from a retired woman who used to work in a confectioner’s shop and she always puts candies in the large envelopes. Möller said that there is an almost tragic element to this contact. The elderly women once admitted to him that she writes so often because he reminds her of a German soldier whom she fell in love with as a twelve-year-old girl. She had kept him hidden in a barn near Kielce for a while. But the desire for revenge was so great in the village that the mob picked up the German shortly before the war ended and executed him. She said he lay naked on a field with a bullet hole in his forehead and the blood all around him had already dried by the time she found him. And this picture of the executed soldier has remained with her all her life.

“I am the person to talk to for all German–Polish fates,” said Möller. Because Poles don’t know any Germans whom they can tell their stories, they tell them to him. He said he’s a kind of outlet for Poles to vent their war traumas.

Our conversation was threatening to get as sad as an episode “M jak Miłość¨” so I decided to broach the subject of the basic differences in mentality between Poles and Germans. Stereotypes that nourish Möller’s cabaret program.

“The hospitality!” Möller shouted out loud, telling about how he recently was in Berlin. Visiting a friend. And this friend, who shares an apartment with some friends, refused to give him food and drink. In any case, he didn’t offer him anything. This would have been unthinkable in Poland, where you are handed sausage and alcohol as soon as you step across the threshold. In Berlin he had to refresh himself secretly with some ham from the kitchen. On top of that there was a piggy bank in the bathroom and everyone who took a shower was supposed to pay 50 cents so everyone would pay

their fair share of the hot water costs. That is a very narrow-minded idea of fairness, Möller said. And for Poles, who celebrated sweeping feasts that bordered on wastefulness, this piggy bank would have been scandalous, nothing short of a declaration of war against the guest. No one could expect a guest to pay a share of the ongoing costs of the apartment. I argued that there were also dark sides to that Polish hospitality. How often had I had to watch—when visiting Polish friends and relatives—how the meager space that is already too tight for a family was almost entirely emptied out to make room for me. And how even doddering grandfathers had to offer up their beds for me, and lay their own tired bones down to sleep on the hard, wood floor. I myself would then sleep miserably, feeling I was unduly honored, like a decadent king. The hospitality, I continued, has a stifling side. You have to continually eat sausage and feel stuffed from all that borscht and vodka. And besides, the crowdedness—the situation when entire extended families squeeze into only a few square meters of space for dinner—causes palpitations. At least for a guest who suffers from claustrophobia anyway. And it is only possible to refuse the offered meals with a vehemence that quickly falls off the politeness scale.

Well, said Möller, you have to know the codes. You have to refuse a dish precisely three times before your host takes you seriously. And on the telephone you have to say goodbye at least five times before you can allow yourself to hang up.

Steffen Möller took a sip of coffee, thought for a moment, and said there was another, more fundamental difference between Poles and Germans that he had noticed: “In Poland everyone knows their blood type. Everyone.”

I expressed my doubt. Möller stood up and sat down next to his former student, who immediately blushed and started playing with her hair. She said, no, she has to disappoint him, no, she really doesn’t know her blood type.

Of course, Möller said with feigned disappointment, there are always these exceptions to the rule. But in principle the thing with blood types is true. It is strange, I said somewhat out of the blue, that our life histories are virtual opposites. He is one of the few Germans who ventured to go to Poland to live here, and I am a Pole who has emigrated to Germany. And we share the fact that we are both exploring the

country in broken Polish. “Are you for Germany or Poland in the soccer World Cup?” asked Möller. The question was inevitable and my answer side-stepped it entirely, saying that Poland is not a tournament team, they have never won a single game against Germany. That would also explain, Möller added, why the Poles, who did in fact follow international soccer very closely, do not even know the name of their own national team coach.

I expressed my doubt. Möller stood up again and sat back down next to his former student, who beamed at him and put her magazine aside. She said, no, she has to disappoint him, no, she really doesn’t know the name of the national team coach.

“See,” said Möller, “the stereotypes really are true.” Then he said goodbye, said that he is in the process of renovating his apartment and the workers, you know, you have to keep an eye on them now and then.

Two days later Möller was performing. In a small restaurant in Poznań. A place called Aplauz. The spotlights were shining on him, the audience was drinking beer, and Möller told a joke in his warm-up program: “A train from Berlin is coming. The conductor shouts ‘Gliwice, Gliwice, formerly Gleiwitz.’ And at the next station: ‘Zabrze, Zabrze, formerly Hindenburg.’ An old Polish man gets off the train, goes to the conductor and says, ‘Do widzenia, Auf Wiedersehen, formerly Heil Hitler.’” The punch line brought guffaws of laughter. And in the course of the evening Möller told one after another of his everyday observations. He said that in Berlin the bars are especially crowded on Christmas, which the audience thought was a bad joke, since Christmas is a family festival, of course you don’t go out. And if they do, then the Germans are a godless, sinister people. And Möller said that all Poles believed that German women don’t shave their underarms. Although that is often true, he said, there are exceptions. Then he lauded Polish hospitality and their talent at improvising. And after the show he signed autographs and a big-bellied guest, after buying a CD of his program, asked him if there are any taboos. Things that you can’t make jokes about in Poland.

Möller answered very seriously. Yes, he said, the pope is taboo, and the ski jumper Adam Małysz, and also, well, the food. Food in Poland isn’t all that good, he said.

And for a moment it seemed as if the man regretted having bought the CD. As if Steffen Möller had deceived him.