Tomasz Jarosik scraped the razor across one cheek then down under his chin, following the droop of a sagging jowl fattened on a diet of venison, boar and jugged hare. He flicked the foam into the sink, glimpsed his sleeping wife in the mirror, her nightgown tangled up around her haunches, her breathing heavy like the throaty nicker of an ageing mare. He licked his lips. Only a half-day’s work until he could take his gun and dog out into the forest.

He dressed quickly, fried up a breakfast of bacon on a slab of black bread washed down with a mug of beer. He prepared a flask of coffee, wrapped himself up in his heaviest jacket, fed the dog the last of the pig rinds, gave his wife a light slap across her buttocks.

‘Up, Magda.’

Magda groaned, moved on the bed so her gown rose even further on her thighs. He grabbed a handful of the mottled flesh. ‘Up,’ he said.

‘Go to hell,’ she mumbled, wriggling his hand away with a toss of her rump.

It was still dark when he stepped outside, frost on the ground, the chill nipping his cheeks, scraping at his nostrils. He stood at the bus stop, the bend of his elbow keeping his flask wedged tightly inside his jacket for some extra warmth. He didn’t have to wait long. The church clock lurched to half-past six and right on time the shiny, lit-up work-bus swept

round the corner, hissed to a stop level with his feet, the front door already opening to let him into the light and the warmth. He gave a half-salute to Jerzy the driver, then swung himself up the aisle, hands gripping the back of each seat, until he reached his usual spot, settled down. He glanced at the only other passenger, Madame Czarnecka, a tense, tight-lipped woman who worked in administration. She always had a book in her hand, her own personal wrap of plain brown paper concealing what rumours said was erotica. He poured himself a cup of coffee, unfolded the previous day’s newspaper. This was his favourite time, those precious twenty minutes before the bus arrived at the next town.

For here they came, those gaggling girls with their gossip and their make-up still to be plastered on. Quite an art Tomasz thought given the sway of the bus, with a glance to their skinny legs. The girls ignored him, puckered their lips in a readiness to be reddened, ready to be kissed by a man much younger than he. Yet, he could still feel the longing, why shouldn’t he? The last time he had felt Magda’s mouth on his own, Lech Walesa was still president of this ruin of a country. Most of these girls worked in the kitchen, reception or in the gift shop, the tour guides among them keeping their smart uniforms to themselves further up the

bus. He snapped at his newspaper, scrunched down further into his jacket until the collar covered his ears, he and Jerzy the only males on board.

The sun was up and the dew was glinting off the rime on the flat fields by the time the sentry boxes came into view. So many of them, each one marking another fifty yards closer to the end of his daily journey, the looming barracks still holding the power to silence all the passengers on board. Jerzy turned down the radio and even Madame Czarnecka shut her book, started to fiddle with the clasp of her handbag with her nibbled, ringless fingers. The bus swung into the main avenue and Tomasz glanced at the famous sign over the gateway welcoming him as it did every morning. *‘Arbeit Macht Frei’*.

Tomasz was born after the war, during the coldest winter of the century. His father said if his baby son could survive this freeze, he could survive anything. His father rarely spoke about the war, rarely spoke at all. Tomasz could hardly blame him, his parents had spent years breathing in the ashes of thousands of cremated souls, humming out the sound of tortured screams. The old man had been a woodsman, supplying firewood for the village, then to the Nazis, then to the Russians, then to the villagers again. ‘I don’t care who I sell to,’ his father shrugged. ‘As long as I can feed my family.’ Tomasz would have been a woodsman too if he hadn’t hurt his back, flattened by a tree his father had felled. He ended up upgrading his driving skills so he could swing the school bus around the villages. It was Jerzy who had got him this job, the pay was much better, he liked the fact he was working for World Cultural Heritage.

It was easy, mindless work, driving his own busload of tourists the two kilometres from A to B. Or at least that’s what the staff called two of the most horrific destinations on earth. From Auschwitz to Birkenau. Then back again. Four trips an hour, twenty-four trips a day, fifty minutes at the end to sweep the inside of the bus, hose it down, fill it up with diesel, lunch in the canteen in between. A to B was a straight road too, following the line of the disused railway track, hardly a chance to move into top gear before he had to slow down again. Never any trouble, the tourists nice and respectful by the time they reached him, softened up and quietened down by a walk through torture chambers, punishment cells, warehouses stacked with shoes and prayer shawls. When he had first started work here, he used to pay his passengers a bit of attention, assessing the reaction of the different nationalities and age groups, he gave each of them a little nod of compassion as they stepped on board. Now he didn’t even bother, just sat there with the engine ticking over nicely, his cup of coffee resting on his belly. He might hear a few of them sobbing at the back, but a little pressure on the accelerator soon drowned them out. He would just scratch his cheek, look off beyond the barracks and the electric fences and the sentry boxes to the faraway forests where he imagined the boar wallowing in their muddy pools.

On this morning, his shift started with three trips from A to B and back again with the usual mix of nationalities. These were the independent travellers, the ones who wanted to wander around by themselves, too self-absorbed or too mean to pay for a guide. The group tours didn’t start until around 10.30, he had seen the roster already, annoyed with his assignment on this day when he wanted things to go just right. He went to complain to Madame Czarnecka.

‘You know I don’t do the Israelis,’ he told her. ‘Especially the schoolkids.’

Madame Czarnecka counted off the problem on her bony fingers. ‘Andrzej is sick. So is Konrad. Lodzia has to look after her children. Kazik hasn’t turned up. Today you do the Israelis.’

He looked down the list again. ‘Give me this lot. The synagogue group from New York.’

‘Too late. They’ve gone out with Dodek.’

He stared at her but she locked her arms as a fortress against him. ‘I don’t understand you, Tomasz. Jews. Israelis. What’s the difference?’

There were about thirty of them, probably in their last year of high school before the army took them. Other groups were usually sombre and subdued, dressed-down for the visit, shocked into silence by the time they reached Tomasz. But the Israelis were different, especially the younger ones. They were often noisy and colourfully dressed, some of them even draped themselves in the blue-and-white of their national flag. That was what he hated about them. As if somehow this was their tragedy and no-one else’s. The other drivers told him not to get too upset. After all, the Holocaust was something that had been hammered into these poor kids since birth. This trip through A and B was no shock or surprise, as natural to them as a trip to Disneyland for those brought up on Mickey Mouse rather than tales of the Gestapo knocking at their door.

This morning’s group was particularly raucous, a lot of boy-girl baiting as they clambered on board, one youngster being knocked against Tomasz’s shoulder, not even bothering to apologise. Tomasz grunted, turned down the heating, let them cool off in more ways than one. Beata the tour guide picked up the microphone, tried to quieten them but most of them were not listening, having abandoned the tour’s audio headsets for their own personal stereos. Tomasz opened up the rear exit to let in the chilled air, revved up the engine, glanced at the noisy horde in his mirror, saw a couple of teachers sitting together mid-way down the aisle, chatting away, ignoring the ruckus going on all around them. Beata tried again with her microphone but quickly gave up, turned round to Tomasz with an exasperated look.

‘I’m not moving until they sit,’ he said, then went back to reading his newspaper. Beata brought the microphone close to her lips. ‘Will you please sit down,’ she called out in Hebrew. ‘Please sit.’

The riotous behaviour continued. Tomasz almost felt obliged to grab the microphone himself, deliver his own personal message for them to shut up. He didn’t want to be late. He had a bus to catch himself. There was wild boar to kill.

He looked up from his paper, caught his first glimpse of her in his interior mirror, striding up the aisle in her grey fur hat, dark fitted coat nipped up tight at the collar, with all the haughty grace of one of those elegant women he’d seen strolling along Warsaw’s Nowy Swiat. He hadn’t noticed her before, she must have slipped in through the rear door when he had opened it to let in the cold. This Israeli teacher was nothing like the fair-haired women of his own nation with their cold eyes and even colder hearts. And nothing like the pale Jewesses he associated with the Diaspora. This woman was a dark-skinned, brown-eyed Mediterranean beauty. She snatched the microphone from Beata, reeled off some phrases in Hebrew.

Tomasz glanced again at his mirror. Everyone had stopped talking, Those who had been standing were sinking slowly back into their seats. The two teachers raised themselves up slightly, looked towards their lone colleague with the microphone. She stood just off to his side, her hip almost touching his shoulder. He could hear her breathing, he could smell her scent. She returned the microphone to Beata. And as she did so, whether because she had lost her balance slightly on the step or whether it was a deliberate act, she gripped Tomasz’s upper arm. He felt the pressure of her grasp through his jacket and then as a judder right down his body. She smiled at him.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said in English.

He felt himself redden, almost knocking over his coffee cup with a heave of his belly. When had he last blushed to the smile of a beautiful woman? Probably when Lech Walesa was still president of this dung heap of a country. He observed her again in his mirror as she walked back down the silent aisle to her seat, waited until she had settled.

‘Tomasz,’ Beata said.

‘What?’

‘We can go now.’

He shivered himself into alertness, moved the bus through the gears. ‘What did she say?’ he asked the tour guide.

‘She said she was sorry.’

‘Not to me. To them.’

‘She told them to “remember where you came from.” That was all. Remember where you came from.’

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Tomasz stretched his back, aching from so many hours at the wheel, gazed up to the sky through the ceiling of branches. A perfect afternoon for hunting. A little bit of rain earlier on to fill up the wallowing pools and now not a whiff of wind to alert the boars’ sensitive snouts. The forest always reminded him of his father. As soon as he stepped foot in it, the smell of the loam was enough to set him off, bringing back the sight of the old man with his shouldered axe, always moving slightly ahead until his withered lungs began to slow him down. It was the cigarettes that killed his father in the end although his mother said it was from breathing in the wind-blown ash from the furnaces he had fuelled. God’s punishment she would tell him. She passed away not long after, dying slowly from the same kind of cancer although she never smoked.

He called for his hound, Bazyli, then began his usual routine, checking the tree barks for evidence of rubbing, the soil for signs of rooting. Bazyli was also adept at picking up spots where the boar had been, sniffing the soil like a demented vacuum cleaner, anxious to please his master with a detected scent. He was glad he had come out on his own. He had no time today for Stefan with his endless prattle about pensions or chubby Pawel with his breathless boasts about hog hunted in Germany. This was how he liked it. Just a man, a dog, his quarry somewhere out in the woods, and the silence.

Back in the summer, the three of them had built two new huts, each placed in a different part of the forest beside potential wallowing pools. He had to admit to being grateful to Pawel regarding their strategic positioning because they had managed to shoot a good amount of boar from each of them all through the season. The problem was in deciding which one to shoot from today. He had hoped it wasn’t going to be the one furthest away but the various tell-tale signs on the trees and in the soil had pointed him in that general direction until after struggling high into the forest, he eventually settled himself down there, panting and hungry. He looked at his watch. Almost four o’clock. He reckoned on another two hours and the boar would be out just before dusk.

The platform for the hut was built on stilts with a few rickety steps for access, more as a hiding place rather than for protection against a full-on charge. Three walls, front and to the sides, each with their own large viewing window, a camouflage of branches and a ledge just at the right height to take the lean of a rifle barrel. There were a few dirty cushions scattered around, a pile of withered hunting magazines, a dwindled stack of sardine tins, a few empty plastic bottles sliced open to catch the rain. Tomasz heaved himself into a sitting position with a good view of the wallow about thirty feet away. He took out the foil wrap of beef sandwiches Magda had made up for him, the advantage of being married to a butcher’s daughter, always meat in the house even though they were always the worst cuts.

Friends who weren’t hunters used to say to him it must be good to be out there in the woods by yourself, all that time to think. But the truth was he never really thought about anything. At least, not anything significant. He might ponder the previous evening’s football results but that was about it. Work never troubled him, Magda rarely troubled him, politics bored him, there were no children to fret over, he just sat there with his eyes, ears and Winchester primed for the kill, thinking of nothing. It had been the same with his father. When as a boy he had sat with him, watching the old man’s expressionless blue-grey eyes staring out at the woods, he remembered asking him for his thoughts. ‘It doesn’t help a man to dwell too much on anything,’ his father had replied. Tomasz only ever once probed further to ask about what had happened during the war. The old man had shuddered then, spat out some loose tobacco from his roll-up. ‘Well, they got what they wanted,’ he had said bitterly. ‘Who got what?’ Tomasz asked. ‘You know. They got their state. Out there in Palestine.’

But as he sat there looking out into the forest, his Winchester resting on the ledge, it wasn’t memories of his father that came to him. It was the image of the Israeli teacher that kept nudging for his attention. He even touched his arm where she had placed her own hand that very morning. She had caused such an ache inside of him that at one point, he thought he should just unbutton himself there and then and relieve himself like he used to do when he was a teenager. There were even a few pages of porn stashed under the hunting magazines for the purpose. But then he saw Bazyli’s ears prick up, and he hunkered down into a silence. He knew he had to keep still, hold his breathing shallow, quieten the heart and hope the breeze didn’t carry the scent of man or dog. Wild boar might be short-sighted but their sense of hearing and smell was acute. Bazyli stirred again and Tomasz felt his heart lurch on hearing the crumple of leaves and broken branches as the giant hulk of meat and tusk came rushing through the trees.

It was a prize target, a mature hog, must have weighed in at more than 100 kilos. The beast went straight for the mud pool, almost childlike in its joy as it sank into the wallow. Tomasz followed the animal with the sight of his rifle, his arms shaking with excitement as he eased his finger over the trigger. Such ugly creatures, all out of proportion with their heavy bodies on those skinny legs, the flared tusks, the bristled hide and those horrible snouts. With a bear, a stag, even with a rabbit, he might experience a slight regret at the kill, but with a wild boar he couldn’t care less. The more of these grotesque animals he could slaughter the better.

He ran his tongue over his dried lips. He would wait until the boar was fully broadside before he fired, aiming forward and low where the vital organs were lodged. That way if he caught it too high then at least he would shatter a shoulder, kill the collapsed body quick with a follow-up shot. What he didn’t want was the beast to turn head-on. Then he would have to go for the brain where the skull was thick and no easy target.

He adjusted his stance ever so slightly, moving his leg where he had a slight cramp. His foot hit a couple of empty tins. He had hardly made a sound but that hog picked up the noise straight away, turned quickly towards its source. Damn, Thomasz hissed.

The beast moved out of the mud pool its tiny eyes staring right at him, snout down with those sharp tusks flaring. He lodged the rifle butt harder into his shoulder as he tried to fix the animal’s head in his sight with his trembling hands. What was happening to him? He was an experienced hunter with hundreds of kills under his belt yet his composure was all over the place. He took his forward grip off the rifle, placed it over his racing heart. Was he about to have some kind of seizure? The boar started to drive towards the hut. Tiny legs carrying such a heavy weight yet the animal could move swift across the ground. If he had Pawel and Stefan with him, one of their trio was bound to fell the beast. But this was all up to him. He gripped the rifle again. He had to hit the animal cleanly right through its skull. He focused on the bobbing target through his sights and as the beast charged towards him, bringing with it the possibility of imminent death, he remembered where he came from.