

# VODKA & APPLE JUICE

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*The limits of my language mean the limits of my world.*

Ludwig Wittgenstein

## CANBERRA

I suspected that I did not have my dream job. The fact that I was hiding from my boss in a toilet cubicle was a dead giveaway.

‘Jay?’

She had followed me in here? You cannot be serious.

I had a week to go before I left for Poland. Before Tom and I packed up our lives and moved to Warsaw, for his first stint as a diplomat. Despite having eighteen months’ notice, we’d only started doing anything about it in the last two. How long could it take to move to a new country, after all, we’d figured?

Whatever the right answer was, two months wasn’t it. Everything about moving had turned out to be so much more work than I’d expected. Packing up everything we owned into boxes and putting them on a ship. Working out what we should take with us for the next three years, and what to leave in storage. Should we pack the wedding photos? The tax records? The laundry basket? What was more possible: that the storage unit would burn down, or that the ship carrying our possessions might sink? Cleaning the house and getting it rented out, selling the car and hiring another one for our last few weeks, getting official passports, signing insurance papers, doing our wills and changing the addresses on all our mail. ‘Warsaw Bag’ I’d spelled out to what must have been every call centre worker between Manila and Mumbai. Wasn’t there

someone at Tom's work whose job it was to advise you about these things? It seemed like the sort of thing someone in the Department of Foreign Affairs should have done before. Maybe one of the people whose business cards read, 'Relocation Support', for example.

I'd thought the last decade I'd spent in my job, heading up a high profile government policy team in Canberra, had prepared me for anything. Ten years of dealing with the fifty staff I'd accumulated somewhere up the career ladder, and a procession of twenty-nothing-year-old ministerial advisers who thought calling me every five minutes to check how that ministerial brief was going would get it to them more quickly. Slamming together media statements for ministers who needed me to have a bright idea on their behalf because the polls had dropped. Pulling all nighters to get the papers ready for the next Cabinet meeting. And yet ...

'Jay? Are you there?'

OK, now I was sure. This was not my dream job.

'Just a sec!' I flushed, keeping up the ruse.

My mobile rang. Tom. He was at home, dealing with the movers who were in charge of getting the container of stuff we were taking with us to Warsaw, and the rest to wherever the storage facility the Department had organised was.

'What's up?' I held my phone to my ear and ran my hands under the tap. My boss tapped her watch and huffed out.

'I need that second set of keys.'

And the minister needed his briefing and my boss wanted her KPI reports and my team leaders were waiting for their succession plan. Take a number, Tom.

'Ah, cutlery drawer, white plastic container? Or kitchen windowsill maybe?'

I heard his footsteps on our kitchen tiles. Charlie barked. Charlie, who had no idea we were about to give him away to

another family. Would have no idea why we didn't come home and take him for walks up Red Hill anymore. Tears pricked my eyes.

Shit. No walk for him tonight either. Polish class, I remembered. And I hadn't done my homework. Shit shit shit. Polish grammar wasn't something you could fudge. My chest tightened.

I heard Tom opening and closing drawers. 'Do you want to catch up with Pete and Danny one last time on the weekend?'

What I didn't want, right now, was to be having a conversation about a social life that involved people I was not going to see for three years.

'I need to go, Tom. Text me if you can't find them. OK?'

When I told people I was about to move to Poland for three years with Tom, they'd always ask what I was going to do there. Snow, cabbage and pork were pretty much all that came to my mind when I thought of Poland. As a vegetarian, that was an immediate challenge. At least I ate fish. If there were fish in Poland.

I looked in the mirror. OK, brave face. I had a mountain of work to get done and two more days to do it. And my boss still hadn't signed the exit form I needed for my final pay. I took a deep breath, steeled myself and headed for my office. Through the glass wall I could see two of my team leaders there, waiting for me.

Tom's number flashed up again.

'Yep?'

'The movers backed their truck over the water supply,' said Tom. 'Our driveway's turned into a waterfall. Your name's on the account so the company says you'll have to deal with it.'

I didn't know what I was going to do when I got to Poland. I just knew that it wasn't going to be this. That was good enough for me.

## LATO - SUMMER

Tom and I, a café, Warsaw's Old Town Square. Slender houses in golden plaster, an old couple on a bench throwing bread crumbs to pigeons, buskers with accordions, geraniums on windowsills. The sun warmed my face, through a red-and-white parasol advertising what I presumed was a Polish beer brand. The centre of the town in the centre of the country in the centre of Europe. If you were going to live in Europe for three years, this is exactly how you wanted it to look. And that's exactly what I was going to do.

'We made it,' I said, dragging my eyes away to look at Tom.

'We sure did,' Tom said. He squeezed my hand.

It was a bright July day, and we were the world's most newly minted diplomats. Or one newly minted diplomat, and one new diplomatic wife. I closed my eyes and breathed in warm, fragrant air. Poland even smelled good.

A stocky waiter approached with an order pad.

I sat up straight. '*Dwa cappuccino, proszę*,' I said, and smiled at Tom. He winked at me. My first words in Polish in this country. Never mind that one was Italian.

'*Shshshshshshsh*,' the waiter replied. A torrent of Polish with nary a vowel in sight.

'*Proszę, nie rozumiem.*' Please, I not understanding. My second Polish phrase in this country.

‘Will you be paying by cash or card?’ he said.

‘Cash,’ said Tom. The server turned to leave.

‘*Proszę pana,*’ I called him back. ‘Um ... what that is saying in Polish?’ I asked, in Polish. More or less.

‘*Gotówką,*’ the server replied, more slowly.

‘*Go-toof-kan,*’ I repeated after him. Cash. Not even two hours here, and a new word! Not a bad effort. I smiled at Tom again. With his tall, slim frame and olive skin courtesy of some Spanish ancestry, he stood out as foreign here. Being blue-eyed and blonde, I seemed to fit in well enough. Although, from the women I could see around me, it seemed I would need some more fashionable clothes and a bit more makeup to be inconspicuous. I reminded myself that, unlike them, I’d stepped off the last of three consecutive long-haul flights a few hours earlier and my body clock thought it was two in the morning.

‘I married a computer nerd, and now here we are in Poland as diplomats! How did that happen?’ I said.

‘My mid-life crisis, wasn’t it?’

‘Well, I’m glad your mid-life crisis involved a career change, not a hot blonde.’

‘I married my hot blonde seven years ago.’

A flock of pigeons flew past. The old couple who’d been sitting on the bench had doled out all their crumbs. The man helped his wife to her feet and they shuffled past, he steadying her over the rough cobblestones.

‘*Dziękuję,*’ I thanked the waiter, when our order arrived. Those eighteen months of Polish classes were finally paying off. Whatever else my time here was going to involve, I was definitely going to nail this language. Everything in our house in Canberra had been labelled in Polish – our kettle a *czajnik*, our wardrobe a *szafka*. Tom and I had started texting each other *tak* and *nie*, not yes and no – although that was about all I’d managed to teach him so far. There was no pretending



it was going to be easy; my teacher, Agnieszka, was given to apologising for the language's excessive complexities, and even our textbook had been called *Ach, ten język Polski – Oh, This Polish Language*. But I was determined to get every cent's worth out of this experience, and that meant learning Polish. Grosze, I meant. I was determined to get every grosze's worth out of this.

'Anyway, you can hardly talk. I thought I'd married a go-getter career woman. Now here you are, a diplomatic wife,' Tom said.

'Yeah, well, your go-getter wife went and got out of that career just in time, I think.'

The waiter brought us our order. Polish coffee. Two words that, to me, sat as comfortably together as teenagers on a first date. There was a lot riding on this. Whether or not I could get a decent coffee would be a big factor in determining if Poland and I were going to get along. I took a sip. Smooth, milky, not bitter. Perfect. Perfect for me.

'We haven't been dropped in Vienna or Paris by accident, have we?' said Tom. 'Where are the potato queues?'

'And isn't there meant to be snow?'

I remembered the first winter Tom and I had spent in Canberra, after moving there from temperate Perth. How we'd struggled to get ourselves out of the house on the few mornings it dropped just under zero, and we had to scrape ice off the car. Neither of us could have imagined that our next move would be somewhere even colder. Agnieszka told me it got so cold in Poland sometimes that you had to wear two beanies! Surely she was exaggerating?

It seemed hard to imagine today, when children and dogs splashed about in an open air fountain, screams and barks of delight echoing around the square. As hard to imagine as that this Old Town – *rynek* in Polish – had been razed to the ground in the war. It had been painstakingly rebuilt, giving no hint

that it hadn't stood here just like this for hundreds of years, watching over its neighbour, the Vistula River, the whole time.

'Hey, we should go up to Gdansk one weekend soon. It's supposed to be nice. There's even a beach there,' I said.

'That's a great idea. But ...' Tom looked over the top of his glasses at me.

'You know this weather's not going to last.'

'I do. We don't have to do everything in the first week, that's all.'

But there was no holding me back. I'd been planning this for eighteen months. Pouring over Google Maps every lunch time from my office desk, imagining all of the places I could go when I was finally here – no longer Canberra, a city that didn't even have an international airport. When I'd finally escaped my predictable, suburban life, and moved to Warsaw!

The waiter brought our bill, and Tom handed him a crisp note.

'Don't you have any change?' We shook our heads, and his brow creased. We pounced on the coins he returned with, turning them over in our hands to get to know them a little before leaving them on the plate. So that was what a *grosze* looked like.

'How was your coffee?' Tom asked.

'*Dobra!*' I said.

Yes, Poland and I were going to get along just fine.

\*\*\*

A week into my new life I swapped my tailored pants suits for jeans and a T-shirt and walked into my first Polish class at the language school Agnieszka had recommended. The two other students introduced themselves: Svetlana from Moscow and Jutta from Munich. They'd started three weeks before.

'Australia?' my new Polish teacher, who was also called Agnieszka, repeated my country of origin back to me. 'And

how long have you learned Polish?’ she asked.

‘One and half year,’ I replied, proud of my ability to converse in this foreign tongue.

‘You have Aboriginal people in Australia, correct?’ she said.

‘Um, yes. Have.’ That turn in the conversation had been unexpected.

‘So, can you tell me, what is the situation of Aboriginal people in Australia?’

‘Ah ...’ A German, a Russian and a Pole were waiting.

‘Difficult thing ...’ I said.

‘Yes of course, just briefly.’ I knew all the months of the year and days of the week. I wondered if she’d accept any of those in lieu of a pronouncement on the most vexed issue in contemporary Australia.

‘Very difficult thing,’ I finally said, I suspected not adding much. Her lips pursed, confirming as much.

My first Polish teacher Agnieszka had shepherded a small but diligent band of students through the minefield that was Polish grammar like a lioness carrying her litter in her mouth. When one of us got something wrong, a pained expression would come over her face and she’d agree that, yes, what we’d said was logical ... but not correct, because while *do* was the word for ‘to’, you only used it for going to somewhere that was three-dimensional – a house, a city. For something flat – a park, a road – you used *na*, meaning ‘on’. Or for an airport, which was sort of more flat than three-dimensional. If you used your imagination. Except if the flat thing was a body of water, like a lake or a sea, in which case you said ‘under’, and added *-im* to the end of the noun if it was masculine, changed the final *a* to *ą* in the singular feminine, and if it was neuter ... *Ach, ten język Polski* indeed.

My new Polish teacher Agnieszka took a different approach. This Agnieszka launched into a description of the rules governing the sixth of seven Polish cases, the locative, to be

used where an activity was conducted somewhere (sometimes), someone was going somewhere (sometimes), or in various other situations, not all of which were obvious to me. In which cases, masculine nouns added -u, except for *g* which turned to -*dze* and *d* to -*dge*, feminine nouns turned the final -*ka* to -*ce*, neuter nouns also turned -*ko* to -*ce*, adjectives took the -*ym*, -*ej*, -*ymi* endings and *ł* – of course – undertook the usual sound swaps to turn to *le*. Now in the vocative case ... my gaze drifted out the window across the street, to the pre-war architecture, the wide parade square ringed with Soviet facades, the billboards advertising the Polish version of ‘So You Think You Can Dance’.

Three hours later, she paused for breath. ‘Clear?’ she said. Protecting fragile spirits from the Polish language, it seemed, was not in Agnieszka (the second’s) job description.

The three of us nodded – I think we were in shock – and she dismissed us for the day. We had a new textbook here: *Polish in Four Weeks*. Clearly, if we were going to achieve this KPI we were going to have to get a wriggle on. For a split second, I missed my staffing budgets.

‘Coffee at Zlote Tarasy?’ Jutta suggested to Svetlana and me.

‘Sure,’ I said. I had no idea what that was, but the coffee part sounded comforting.

Zlote Tarasy turned out to be a shopping centre across from the school, a cascade of glass panels three storeys high that emerged from the towering office blocks behind it like a frozen waterfall. We sat ourselves in an Italian place in the open air section at its base, and a gum-chewing waitress came to take our order. I pointed to one of the items on the menu.

‘She is vegetarian pizza this, yes?’ I asked her. She assured me that, yes, she was. The three of us ordered that to share and various forms of caffeine. I took a deep breath. Help was on the way.

‘So why are you learning Polish?’ Jutta asked.

'I'm going to be living here for three years,' I said. Neither of them looked very convinced about this as an answer.

'Can Anglo-Saxons learn Polish?' Svetlana said. I wasn't sure how to respond. Was I Anglo-Saxon?

Our order came. Vegetarian pizza...including salami. Clearly vegetarian had a different meaning here. I picked off the smoked meat as best as I could.

Jutta and Svetlana were both here visiting Polish boyfriends. Jutta was on her summer break from psychology studies in Stuttgart, while Svetlana was about to start graduate studies in Moscow. Both had the sort of long, straight hair and slim figures that were effortless in your early twenties, and conversed in idiomatic English. Sitting in my office in Canberra, I'd imagined sitting with my classmates after class, gabbering in broken Polish with them. But my imagination hadn't included a morning with Agnieszka. Nor speaking to no one other than Tom for a whole week. I erased my earlier vision and let myself indulge in my mother tongue.

'So what do you do with yourself – other than trying to learn Polish?' Jutta asked.

Most of my first week here had been spent trying to find things. Find all our receipts so Tom could acquit our travel. Find a drycleaner for his suits. Find out where to buy everything from breakfast cereal to vegetables to sticky tape to washing powder. Find a mobile phone – and a mobile phone plan, although I hadn't quite managed that one yet, I was still on pre-pay. Find out how to buy a tram ticket – and where the trams went. There were other things on my list, like find a tennis court – but they were further down. I'd need to find someone to play tennis with first. But all of those things had another step first – find out what 'drycleaner' and 'sticky tape' were in Polish, so I knew what to try and ask for. I started to wonder how Tom and I had managed to get all of these sorts of administrative things done when we were both working.

But, of course, I knew where to buy sticky tape in Canberra, and even what it was called.

I didn't think much of that sounded very interesting, so I told them about setting up our apartment instead. With its marble entryway, state-of-the-art kitchen and a bath that I hoped came with an instruction manual, it was nothing like we would have chosen ourselves, but it was 'where diplomats lived', Tom had been told by the embassy. Still, we did like its inner-city location, about ten minutes' walk to Tom's office or the Old Town *rynek* where we'd had coffee our first day. Our possessions were still on a ship somewhere between Sydney and the Polish port of Gdansk; I'd been particularly proud of my two-bus transfer to get to IKEA, in an outer suburb, to supplement what we'd managed to stuff into four suitcases with a few vital purchases. Like a laundry basket. Not included, it turned out. It was the first experience of apartment living for either Tom or I – but with two bedrooms, a single open-plan dining room and kitchen, and small separate study, I thought we could make it work.

'It's lovely, although a bit small – just one hundred square metres,' I said.

Svetlana and Jutta burst out laughing. 'My apartment is forty square metres,' Jutta said.

'Mine's thirty-five,' Svetlana said.

What did a thirty-five square metre apartment even look like?

I looked around, reminding myself. I was here! In Warsaw! It wasn't that obvious. The *al fresco* dining experience was Italian – or Australian, for that matter. The shopping centre, from what I could see, worked like those in any major city: people went in with full wallets, and came out with shopping bags from Hugo Boss, Samsonite, Body Shop, and takeaway containers from Subway and McDonald's. Although what was inside the bags marked 'Krakowski Kredens', 'Tatum' or 'Empik' was a mystery to me.

‘This could be a shopping centre anywhere in the world, couldn’t it?’ I said.

‘Yeah, anywhere in the world with one of those.’ Jutta pointed to a giant concrete tower looming over us. The Palace of Culture and Science, according to its sign, or just ‘the Palace’, according to Agnieszka, who’d pointed it out across the way from our classroom during a mercy break. A thirty-storey building straight out of Gotham City, including turrets, concrete lacework and a clock tower. ‘Stalin’s Wedding Cake’, she’d said people also called it, a nod to the man who’d commissioned it, and his particular tastes in architecture.

‘We’ve got six in Moscow. Except they’re bigger,’ Svetlana said.

‘What do you need six for?’ Jutta asked.

‘The communists liked to make things like that.’ Svetlana seemed the pragmatic type.

‘Do you remember much about communism?’ I asked her. She told me about one time she had been lining up for sugar with her grandparents, and been disappointed when they got to the end of the line and there was none left to buy. Not surprised – just disappointed. ‘Poland was very well known, though. We knew it was where jeans came from – from Germany, though Poland, to Russia. You could make ten times the original price on the way through.’

The waitress came to take our plates.

‘Excuse me, that pizza, she call vegetarian, but she have ... umm ... salami on her?’ I asked.

‘Yes, the vegetarian pizza comes with salami,’ she said, and walked away.

I was obviously going to have to get more specific about my eating habits here.

‘OK, I’m going to go,’ I said, downing the last drop of my coffee. ‘We’re thinking of going to Gdansk before summer ends so I’m going to go and get train tickets.’

‘Do you want company? I don’t have anything planned for the afternoon,’ Jutta asked.

‘Thanks. I’m sure I’ll be fine.’

I wondered how my life looked to Jutta and Svetlana. When I was about their age I’d gone travelling in Europe too – exotic places like France, England and Germany, having worked every weekend and school holiday to afford three months away. The future I’d dreamed of for myself then looked like my life in Canberra: a busy, professional job, meetings with important people. Not following someone to another country and looking for vegetables. What did they think of this ‘diplomatic wife’ they were having language classes and coffee with?

Still, we three were the school’s entire complement of foreigners learning Polish, the coordinator had told me, and so this was the only class I could join. It was nice that, from what I could tell from lesson one, we were all at about the same level – of both capability and confusion. Although that meant they’d learned about as much Polish in three weeks as I’d managed in ... anyway, that wasn’t important.

We swapped mobile numbers. That made four numbers in my phone – after Tom’s and the embassy.

‘Ok, see you guys again tomorrow!’ I waved them goodbye, and headed towards where I thought Warsaw’s main train station, Warszawa Centralna, was. I guessed you could get tickets in there somewhere? One way to find out. I clutched my bag to my chest as I made my way through the maze of grotty underground tunnels, flanked by neon-lit stores selling kebabs, energy drinks and cheap nylon clothes. Yellow billboards gave destinations and times, which I took down among my scribble of Polish notes from the class. I’d have to sit somewhere and try and make sense of those in a bit.

With the times of the trains I wanted in hand, I headed for the counter marked ‘International’ in English, German and Russian, and stood in the queue. Above the sign a



departures board showed places I could buy tickets to from here: Minsk, Berlin, Prague, Amsterdam. Something told me I would be back here again. I ran through the lines I needed in my head, paying particular attention to my *dziewięćs* and *dziesięćs* – nines and tens. Or tens and nines – I struggled to tell them apart with their difference of just one consonant. For some reason, Sunday and Monday, *niedziela* and *poniedziałek*, tripped me up, too.

My turn, and a lady summoned me to the counter with a bored wave. I figured we could always switch to English, although I was sure she would appreciate my efforts to try in Polish. I launched into my rehearsed lines.

‘Me want two ticket Gdansk, go Saturday come Sunday.’ I stumbled through the times I’d got off the timetables on the station walls, for a date a few weeks away.

‘*Shshshshshsh-klasa-shshsh*?’ she asked, typing something into a computer without looking up. *Klasa*, was that? Which class?

‘Two,’ I said. OK! I could do this!

‘*Shshshshshsh*?’

‘No smoke,’ I tried. I didn’t know if that was what she’d asked but that had been in the textbook lesson on ‘buying train tickets’.

‘*Shshshshshsh*,’ she said again. Hmm. Perhaps she hadn’t done the same buying train tickets lesson I had.

‘You speak English?’ I asked. She looked at me with disdain. If she did, she wasn’t going to. And I hadn’t earned any points for trying in Polish. With no better ideas, I just repeated my request again – ‘Me want two ticket Gdansk, go Saturday come Sunday’.

‘*Shshshshshsh*,’ she said, punching something into a keyboard. The ticket machine stamped some text on yellow paper and spat the tickets out. It was definitely on her side. She threw them under the glass, scrawled a figure on a piece of paper and

jabbed a painted nail at it. From the guidebook, I'd calculated that it would cost about one hundred zloty each. The figure on the paper was about half of that total. I quickly glanced behind me. A queue was mounting. I didn't want to hold people up, but I also didn't want to have to line up again if there was something wrong ...

'Two ticket? Gdansk, Warsaw, Gdansk?'

She jabbed her finger at the figure again. I flicked through the tickets. They seemed to be what I'd asked for. Two tickets, Warsaw-Gdansk-Warsaw, on the dates I'd wanted. I paid, took them and left. I wondered if there was a different way to do this.

I hurried out again into the afternoon sunshine. I looked at my watch. Someone was coming to hook up our satellite package at four, and I had to pick up a few things for dinner before then.

Jutta and Svetlana were probably still around town. Maybe they would like to go for another coffee?

No, I should probably just get home and get my Polish homework done. I'd see them tomorrow. Anyway, they were only going to be here a few more weeks. No point getting too attached.

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The weather in our first few weeks in Poland had been hit and miss, but it was a hot, blue sky August day the day Tom and I caught our train to Gdansk.

We dumped our stuff at the hotel and had a quick wander through the town. A short stroll was all we'd needed to take in both the post office, the attack on which heralded the start of World War Two, and the shipyards where the fall of communism had commenced. So much history in such a small area, and I'd had no idea either had taken place here – either in Poland or in Gdansk. Tom was able to fill me in on some of the

details, like the history of the Solidarity – *Solidarność* – strikes at the shipyards that had, eventually, led to the restoration of free elections in Poland. We discovered we'd both found the war interesting as children, me tucked up in my bedroom reading *The Diary of Anne Frank*, him fascinated by airplanes and things that exploded. In our seven years together, we'd never had a reason to talk about the topic before.

I told Tom what Svetlana had told me about her memories of communism, and Poland's place in the system. 'I suppose I thought someone her age would know about it from books, like I did. But she remembered it herself,' I said.

'It wasn't as long ago here,' he said. As though time could work differently in different countries.

By midafternoon, we had made our way a few kilometres further along to the beachside town of Sopot, and settled ourselves on to an empty bit of hot, white sand.

'Here I was, thinking "Polish beach" was an oxymoron. This is as good as anything we've got at home,' I said. 'Polish beach' did seem about as incongruous as 'Polish coffee'. Yet now that we were here, we could have been at any beach in Australia on any summer day. Any very crowded beach, with slightly murkier water, and everyone speaking Polish, that was.

Polish beaches did come with added entertainment value, though: Polish beach fashions. Anyone older than fifty seemed to simply strip down to their underwear and flop into folding chairs – the men in baggy Y-fronts, the women in enormous knickers and lacy bras that strained under the effort of keeping ample bosoms in check. I wondered if this was accepted behaviour in a country with no beach-going tradition. Or maybe old Poles didn't give two hoots what was acceptable. Tom and I couldn't help but have a few giggles at their expense, pointing out the lobster-red shoulders and peeling skin of a few grandmothers – *babcias* – who were letting it all hang out.

'And it was so easy getting here,' said Tom. I think Tom

meant how the train up had been new and fast, and he'd spent the three hours napping in comfy velour armchair seats while the flat fields of northern Poland had sped by, rather than my ordeal with the ticket seller. Still, I agreed with his sentiment: it had been well worth it.

'How did I get to my age without knowing anything about this country?' I said, looking out over – I checked the map in the guidebook – the Gulf of Danzig. Funny, I'd heard of that name, the German for the town of Gdansk, but not its Polish name.

'Maybe you were away the day they did Poland in school,' he said.

Or maybe Poland had been as absent from the Australian school curriculum as it had been from the map over the years this land had come under German and Russian occupation. I jumped up and picked my way through the crowds for another bath in the warm water before flopping back down on my towel, seaweed in my hair.

'So how's being a diplomat so far?' I asked.

Tom had told me a little of his first days on the job. The Australian Embassy in Warsaw was made up of a team of a dozen Polish local staff, the Ambassador, and Tom. Except the Ambassador hadn't arrived yet, which left Tom alone trying to come to terms with his new role, staff and country. The notes left by Tom's predecessor outlined an intense upcoming work schedule of ministerial visits and major events. In the interim, scores of ambassadors, Polish officials, university professors and miscellaneous eminent and erudite individuals wanted to meet him, and his calendar filled with breakfast, lunch and dinner appointments. So different to my days, with their Polish classes and coffees with Jutta and Svetlana, and daily schedule of things to find. Although 'finding things' had now been augmented with 'discovering things,' including that you could get an unlimited monthly pass to the public transport here

for what was – by Australian standards – virtually nothing. A few times now I'd just picked a bus or tram route and gone to the end of it, to see what was there. Sometimes nothing much, although I'd found some shopping malls, a cinema complex, and a grassy river bank that looked nice for bike riding and picnics. Tom and I had decided to do without a car while we were here, for the first time in our lives. It seemed it was going to be an easy decision to stick to.

Tom took longer to consider my question than I had expected. 'Actually, so far I feel like a bit of a fraud,' he finally said. 'All these clever, interesting people want to take me for lunch and talk to me. They all seem to think I'm someone important. I worry that they're expecting a diplomat and they just get me.'

'I'm proud of you, Tom. You know that, don't you?'

'You don't wish I'd just stayed in IT?'

'I love that you took the risk. Most people wouldn't have.'

'Yeah, well, let's hope it's a risk that pays off!' He jumped up. 'I'm going to get a beer. Do you want one?'

'Here on the beach?'

He pointed out all the people drinking around us and I gave him a thumbs up. He brought back two red-and-white cans and we quaffed their contents in the warm sun. Obviously it was not just time but liquor-licensing laws that worked differently in Poland. I'm not sure which was more surprising.

We spent the rest of the afternoon reading on the sand, taking turns to bathe in Sopot's cloudy waters, and appreciating the benefits of an ozone layer that did its job. Had I spent the day like this at home I would have been hospitalised from sunstroke. Here, I was just lightly toasted – from both the sun and the beer.

'Hey, you know what I worked out the other day?' I said, as we packed up towels, lotions and my Polish dictionary to go for dinner.

‘What?’

‘The stuff we’ve been eating as jam for breakfast? It’s actually cranberry sauce!’

Tom reached out and took the heavy bag from me. ‘Well, it tastes alright.’

Dinner was *pierogi* in a local café followed by a few drinks at a beachside vodka bar, and breakfast the next morning was coffee and crepes among thickset Polish families, pink from their sun.

That afternoon, we trudged back to Gdansk Station with our daypacks on our backs, and a successful weekend away under our belts. The station platform was as crowded as the beach had been.

‘What carriage are we?’ Tom asked. I leafed through the tickets. The ones for our journey here had had reference numbers to a carriage, cabin and seats. These ones didn’t seem to.

The train pulled in. Our train up had been new, neat and clean, with a restaurant, bar, and air conditioning. This one had open windows, out of which came the sounds of sweaty, noisy Polish teenagers on the way home from an ocean-side weekend. We struggled aboard with our bags. There were no reserved seats, and it was standing room only. Hence the cheap tickets. So this was what the woman at the ticket counter had been trying to tell me.

Poland. One lesson at a time.