

THE TALE OF THE POSTAL WORKER AND THE STARLET FROM ŁÓDŹ

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The taxis still haven't arrived but the skies have cleared of their patchy cloud cover and we now have brilliant sunshine, covering the whole of Port-Bou, which is making me drowsy. Cadaqués was not conducive to sleep—I slept for only half an hour—and the whole of this morning so far has had an unreal feeling to it. I'm in a hypnagogic state: half-way between waking and sleeping. I had intended to be on my way by train to Avignon by now but due to the train strike the day is turning out to be nothing as planned. Françoise is leaning on her backpack letting the sun hit her full on the face while Javier is pacing up and down away from us, still talking on his mobile phone; he must be working his way through his entire address book. The two elderly couples from Birmingham are still having a great time complaining about how *European* Europe is; you can see the delight and pleasure filling their moist eyes. The American college students are reclining on their backpacks. They're teasing each other, flirting with each other when they can be bothered moving. The mood is like a Balthus painting: they're feline in the sunshine at play.

It's very pleasant here in Port-Bou, waiting for the taxis to arrive to take us across the border into France. I don't really have to go anywhere in a hurry and I have travelling companions so I can take the time to just *be*—rather than racing around—for after all it's a holiday and I'm finally starting to relax. I can feel the various nihilistic toxins of modern day work escaping through the pores of my skin. I'm finally starting to relax after years of being wound up very tight. I wonder how it is all working out with Joseph and Gloria. Might run in to them again, you never know.

We're all going to Paris and Venice, after all. Joseph was even getting fired up about going to Pompeii as well. Who knows? Early November, and still there is this amazing cadmium yellow sunshine. The fine weather can't last, though, as we head further north.

The linguistics scholar from the Sorbonne, an expert in Peruvian Quechua, asks if Françoise and I could bear to listen to another story to pass the time while we wait. She obviously has no small talk. Françoise says 'Sure!' while I say 'Go ahead!' and so the scholar prepares to begin her tale. But first she warns us to make ourselves comfortable for it's long.

'This is another true story. It was told to me by my cousin, the Catholic chaplain, who works in one of the hospitals in Montpellier. He told me this story last year while he was suffering from a spiritual crisis, brought on by an excess of alcohol, a surfeit of suffering and a wavering in faith. He is very handsome for a chaplain. He is also from Milan like me and you could quite easily imagine his female patients endeavouring to trick him into bed. But, anyway, that is beside the point. Settle back and relax, take the weight off your feet, for this is how the story goes... There was a postal worker from Łódź who claimed he knew the way the world went round because he had been reading travel postcards and love letters for over twenty years. He would take home the most interesting looking letters, especially the perfume-scented ones, and read them overnight before re-sealing them and delivering them the next day. He would only get to read one side of the correspondence though—only the letters he was delivering—and consequently he usually developed an empathy and an affection for the sender of the letters and cards rather than for the receiver, as he only ever heard the sender's side of the story. He would stamp his opened letters "May be opened for postal inspection" in order to defray any suspicion. The postal worker who delivered letters was a romantic by nature—most Poles are, by the way—and he claimed to his best friend, another postal worker as it so happened, that in twenty years of reading love letters he could tell whether a relationship was in the early, middle or late phase of love. He would say to his best friend, Tomek, over a few vodkas after work, before he had to race home to make his elderly dying mother her evening meal, that love letters begin in hope in the early

phase before moving on to prosaic matters in the middle phase before finally wavering like a candle in a vast and cruel wind of recrimination and finishing off in an orgy of self-hatred in the last phase. The postal worker would try and rekindle a dying relationship by adding small gifts that he had purchased himself and adding these to the letters, even repackaging the letter and gift into a parcel if need be. His best friend thought he was crazy to spend his hard-earned zlotys in this way but as his best friend didn't have anyone to talk to outside of work hours—neither of them had ever had steady girlfriends whom they could hang on to for more than a few months at a time—then he kept his thoughts pretty much to himself. The postal worker from Łódź thought of himself as *love's secret agent* and he looked forward to reading love letters more than anything else in the world. As he was a kind person by nature, and had given up any hope of finding a woman in order that he might care for his dying mother without interruption, apart from having to go to work, therefore he always hoped for the letter-writing couples he assisted to have long relationships so that his pleasure in reading the striptease correspondence of love might continue. He only occasionally felt jealous at the outpouring of love and affection that he greedily devoured at night—after his dying mother had finally settled for the night, once her tubercular coughing fits had finished and the layer of dust had subsided in her room. The postal worker had tried to get into the world-famous Łódź film school when he was 21 but, having been rejected on the grounds that he was *simple-minded* and *naïve*, then he decided he would make a career in the postal service, but that too had let him down. He felt his life had been spiralling downwards since the age of 21, with one person after another standing in the way of a glittering career. *All jealous of me*, he said to Tomek at his favourite bar one evening. Our humble postal worker tried to keep despair at bay by following the football in the summer and the ice hockey in winter and by drinking conspicuous amounts of vodka with his best friend after work every evening and cooking soup for his dying mother every night. Reading love letters and drinking vodka after work were the postal worker's only escape from the smell of cabbage soup and a mother who would not leave the house and insisted on sitting in

darkness and would say *Dear God, Dear God* every five minutes in a tone of utter exasperation. The pleasures of reading, the postal worker told my cousin the chaplain from his hospital bed, sustained him throughout his dreary existence. He told his superiors at the post office that one day he would leave his job to set up a marriage consultancy business, but they merely laughed at him because they too regarded him as somewhat *simple-minded* and *naïve*. His thoughtless kindness and generosity to strangers had been much remarked upon at his workplace and he had been henceforth labelled *untrustworthy*, but there had been no complaints so they kept him on. The postal worker imagined in his new career he would be able to write love letters for a fee. Having read so many love letters in his working life he felt he could turn a felicitous phrase with the best of them. In his imagination he foresaw a day when he would call himself The Wooing Scribe and would hang out a wooden shingle with gothic lettering on it outside the front door of a rented office in the commercial district of Łódź and Poles would come from far and wide to avail themselves of his talents.

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