

CEMETERY POLKA

BY WILFRIED F. VOSS

THE 18 feet long 1972 Winnebago Brave motor home came to a screeching hold at the traffic light on Flatbush Avenue. Pawel Jarecki set the directional light for a right turn into Kings Highway and, while waiting for the light to turn green, he nervously checked the engine's cooling water temperature gauge. He had spent the entire weekend to get the engine fit for today's trip, but had been unable to stop the leak in the radiator. Replacing the radiator was simply out of the question. That would eat up more than half of his monthly social security check.

A man's gotta eat, he thought, wiping off the sweat from his forehead.

Instead he relied on a battery of twenty gallon-sized plastic milk containers neatly stored in the back of the Winnebago, all thoroughly cleaned and filled with a mixture of engine coolant and water. He had hoped for some colder weather, but it seemed that nature was not on his side. After all, it was November 1st, All-Saints Day, which should be a guarantee for uncomfortable temperatures mixed with rain, but the sun had been shining all day, and it felt like springtime.

An angry driver behind him honked the horn, pulling him out of his thoughts. Pawel noticed the green light and slowly, much to the distress of the cars behind him, made the right turn.

He waved into the rear view mirror. "I am freaking seventy-eight years old," he murmured to himself. "You guys just gotta suck it up."

It was another two miles to their meeting point, the bus stop adjacent to the *Casa Kielbasa*. Everybody in town, especially those of Polish descent, knew "the Casa" as they called it. Good Polish food and excellent service. Lousy beer, though. Pawel didn't care for American light beer in bottles.

Much to the relief of a growing number of drivers, he pulled the Winnebago over to the right into the bus stop where a large group of people seemed to be waiting for the next pick up. He stopped and looked around until he saw his old friend Josef Dabrowski waving, picking up his duffel bag and making his way toward the motor home.

"Hey there, Pawel," Josef called out to him as he opened the passenger side door. He threw the duffel bag onto the bench in the kitchen area and then, very carefully, laid his leather clarinet case next to it.

"Where are Klaudia and Jakub?" Pawel asked him, concerned that something unforeseen might have happened.

"Oh, they're at the grocery store down the road to get some sandwiches and soda."

Pawel grunted. He didn't like any unannounced changes.

We're doing this for six years now, he thought angrily. *We're doing this every freaking All-Saints Day, and, by God, they had enough time to think about food and drinks.*

But he didn't say anything. Instead he pulled into the road, cutting off a white BMW. He looked into the rear view mirror to check for an extended middle finger, and he grinned. Sure enough, there it was.

Another mile down the road he pulled into the large parking lot of the local supermarket. They looked for their friends, Klaudia Malinowska and Jakub Chmielik, but couldn't make them out and they decided to wait.

Pawel popped the motor hood and stepped out of the Winnebago, carrying a gallon of coolant water under his arm. He used some old boxer shorts, stained with oil and grease, to cover the radiator cap, and slowly started to turn it, careful not to get burned by the hot steam emerging from the top of the radiator.

"Do we have a problem?" he heard a voice behind him, and when he turned around he saw Klaudia watching him.

"No," he told her. "She's just getting old, just like us. And she needs some special care, just like us. And she needs a lot to drink..."

"Just like us," Klaudia finished his sentence, laughing.

She held up a couple of plastic bags. "I got us some coolant, too," she grinned. "Mainly coke and sprite."

She winked, "And there's some special for later in the night."

"We're all set then," Pawel said, pouring the coolant into the radiator. He put the lid back on and used the rag to clean off the water he had spilled on the radiator and the rest of the engine. Then he followed Klaudia and Jakub, who were still busy storing their luggage and their instruments, an accordion and a saxophone.

"All aboard," he yelled and looked in the mirror to check his passengers, who took their seats at the small kitchen table, ready to play some cards.

Pawel finally relaxed. They were on their way now. He had his ham and cheese sandwich and a cold soda. Who could ask for more?

They had another twenty miles to go, and it took another two refills of coolant before they arrived at Saint Stanislaus Cemetery. The sun had already begun to set. They left the Winnebago in the front parking lot and carried only their instruments and some plastic bags containing a few essentials for tonight's event. Driving into the cemetery didn't make sense. They would spend the night in the Winnebago, and they would not take any chances by driving home during dark, not to mention the inevitable consumption of good Polish vodka.

"Where exactly is Szymon's grave?" Pawel asked, confused. Szymon Babka had died just a few months after their last visit, and on the day of the funeral Pawel had been in the hospital after a mild heart attack.

"You should know," Klaudia looked at him disapprovingly. "He's buried with his wife."

Pawel felt foolish. Of course, he had seen Szymon's wife's grave every year during the past six years. *Actually, seven years*, he thought.

They all had met, just by chance, on All-Saints Day seven years ago. They all had tucked their small red lanterns in front of the gravestones, and lit a tea light inside, all this to honor their dead spouses. Over a cup of coffee in the nearby family restaurant they had agreed to meet again each year. Everything fell into place that afternoon. Szymon pitched the idea, and Pawel offered to use his Winnebago, and, as they say, the rest is history.

Ironically, it was also Szymon, just months before his demise, who came up with the idea of playing polka music.

"I don't know about you guys," he explained the idea, "but when I become one of the permanent residents here, I wouldn't want to look at the long faces every time you come by."

He grinned, "What do they say? Don't mourn a death. Celebrate a life. I, for my part, would like some good polka music during my funeral."

In the end he didn't get his wish fulfilled. A funeral is for the living, and most of them were appalled by the thought of happy music during a funeral.

With Szymon now dead, this year was different than the previous ones. The old friends proceeded to his grave first, planted the lantern, lit the light, and said a prayer. Then they all went their own ways to visit their respective spouses, place the lantern, light the tea light, talk to the spouse, say a prayer, and wipe their eyes.

They assembled again, one by one emerging from the dark, at the small gazebo surrounded by the lawn in the center of the cemetery. Pawel had brought his camping gas lantern, which he put on the floor in the center of the gazebo. Not a word was spoken, and Klaudia produced the bottle of vodka and passed out shot glasses to everybody. Then she filled the glasses one by one, and when finished, they all saluted and gulped down the liquor.

Pawel set down on the bench, watching the others unpacking their instruments, Josef his clarinet, Jakub his saxophone, and Klaudia strapped on her accordion. Pawel had never had the chance to learn an instrument, but that didn't bother him in the least. After all, he could sing, maybe not good, but definitely loud, and that was just good enough.

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