

“As far as one can imagine you cannot fall off this prairie, even on a map its enormity is sublime — who cannot see that! You can get lost in the life dance with those you love, the man and the children and your relations, *krewny*, and eventually when you are tired, *zmęczony*, this earth swallows you comfortably almost right where you had started. It is an inland sea — ever changing and yet immutable and its soil runs through your fingers like water and flows back to its own.” from *The Sunflower Sisterhood*, Leokadia Solarska.

We — Adam and his children, Basia, Wojtek and myself, waited at the desk for a time as everything was explained to us by the nurse. She wore a Star of David hanging as a necklace. Leokadia would have liked that, but near her end I doubt she even knew who was caring for her. The nurse described how she had attended to her and how then she had phoned us the second time that night. We sat by Leokadia’s body seeing night turn into dawn and then into morning and we prayed together just as she would have wanted. Our poet, our mother, was gone.

I can feel the cheekbones of my skull through my skin as I hang my head in my hands. I can touch my mortality. These are the bones that left untended and unburied would be polished to a shine by the prairie winds and the snow and

the rain, sitting stripped of flesh and exposed, eventually absorbed by the earth on which I have shed so many tears lately. This earth, this nature, wants to remove you as soon as you are gone, and it probably starts even when you still have the quick in you.

Leokadia was from Zakopane in the Carpathians, in the south of Poland. Our people all have the fighter — and the mystic in us. Remember that, she used to remind us. When I was a kid with her I loved to watch Robert Goulet on TV but she liked Penderecki too and even laughed with Stompin' Tom Connors' easy rhymes. Whatever was musical. Her power held my world. Leokadia liked to ski and she liked to walk long distances. For her, life, more than periodically, seemed to be a pure joy and not just a passing of time. She seemed to enjoy the deepening of her senses in action, in movement: the deepest immanence of which was her intense emotion.

It was in her native Poland that she had started writing poetry. A poet was a big deal there. Someone had published a book of her work when she was just at the start of her college years. That's when she had met Adam. He loved her immediately, they both claimed. He knew by heart most of her poems, which he continued to recite to the day she died. He had never recited them all (we had the book to check); there must have been some poems so intimate that only they could share them. They used to laugh a little nervously when we asked about those missing from Adam's repertoire.

They had a cabin cruiser, a twenty-six footer, that they called "Boaty". Leokadia would love to sail to their "mystery" island. If you asked her about

anything for which she cared deeply, like the island, she wouldn't stop embroidering her story until you rolled your eyes and said "Oh please, *proszę!*"

She believed every journey was an opportunity for transformation, an exercise for the imagination. On her island she would walk and meditate; she would circle the island in a couple of hours and onboard Adam would cook their meal and sometimes nurse a brandy or two.

Adam was a stubborn man from Grodno, now in Belarus. Built on a plain and so attainable to whatever army decided to roll across it (save for the toughness of the inhabitants.) It took me decades to realise that Adam thought of himself as an eternally fortunate man, he and Leokadia having survived WWII. His take on the world was that of the fortunate survivor who knew how much so many had lost and yet was amused at how easy life was for him here. He but occasionally regretted this gift, perhaps when remembering those who had not survived. Yet from the time of my first memories he would always try to get a rise out of me, perhaps to rouse me to life. I can imagine him checking his buddies after a firefight during the war with the same humour, prodding them to life with his sharp quick-witted tongue; or burying them with curses at the enemy, or God. So it took me decades to tell he was in some kind of love with me and my brother and sister as well as, of course, with Leokadia.

At their special island on one of Leokadia's pilgrimages into the mystic state and with Adam testing his brandy (she in the community of nature and he with one of its distillates) my youngest brother, Wojtek, was conceived. That, surprisingly, came from my mother through my sister, who heard the story in one

of the heart-to-heart talks Leokadia would so endearingly have with each of us children from time to time. Basia, my sister, said “Mother was so forthcoming as a lesson of what to expect in marriage”, though Basia and her fiancé Stan had never been shy about their affections for each other, even sleeping in the same room once at mother’s. What Leokadia was thinking then that I would never know.

Leokadia sent Christmas cards very early that year because she thought she might leave us before the holidays, as sadly she did. It was a tiny continuous amusement to her right up to her end that she had sent her greetings out and she’d tease us “*Kartki* out?” referring to the Christmas cards. We were too relieved at her good humour to counter that people did not appreciate Christmas cards in September. There was a method to this. The unexpected arrival of Christmas greetings from Leokadia signalled to her friends that something was wrong, and it was only those friends who lived very far away or in the old country that she did not have a chance to make peace with.

Adam was the gatekeeper to all her visitors deciding when Leokadia was strong enough, or when she had to rest. The strain showed even in our *Želaznik*, our man of iron. Once a CFL game was on TV in the waiting room, I think it was even Winnipeg playing, and Adam yelled out, “damned second-rate Canuck game, why don’t you put on the real football!” What could I say, he knew I would always argue with his daft rants, but Leokadia was lying near death close by and I hadn’t the heart for it. What good would it do?

Leokadia was the more level-headed and even-tempered one. Ritual was important to her. As we got older some family traditions seemed strange to us. We often wondered why no one else who was Polish ever followed some of her customs. I learned about mystery like that from Leokadia – the empty place setting at Christmas – for whom? – I’d imagine it to be for a *Góral* – a mountain man, in leather pants and cape with his black felt hat and mountain hatchet! The carefully painted eggs, *pisanki*, everyone made but the old Polish coins baked into cakes at Easter, no one had heard of that! On Christmas Eve, *Święta Noc*, she would move us outside in the snow after dinner, tossing our toasting glasses at the night sky.

Catholic and ardent she had visited the Virgin Mary at Częstochowa in Poland and had had there a short love affair. Or as she was sick and dying (we couldn’t always make out what she meant over her the weight of her illness) she wanted to have an affair here, and the guilt drove her to visit the shrine. But in Poland she had had a “great fall like Daedelus” (as she said), the streets being even more cracked and uneven than are those in Winnipeg as she vehemently explained with expressive eyes and gestures. It was during the treatment of her broken hand that her disease was discovered. As she too poetically often repeated “*Wracałam*, I returned, to live my real life and to face my death.”

Leokadia went to church every Sunday until very near the end. The ambulance service knew they’d probably have to retrieve her there at least two

Sundays out of three. She wouldn't give up her cigarettes though, even as her illness rapidly progressed.

As Leokadia said you couldn't live on poetry in Canada so she had managed Queen E's Deli, a successful *kielbasa* and sausage shop. She did so well the owner offered to sell this gold mine to her after he had suffered a stroke. Adam had said no but when she proved to him how successful she was he mortgaged our house for the money. He would pick her up every day after the shop closed and she'd finished her accounts.

"*Już skończony*" Leokadia would pray in a quote from the passion at Easter, "It is finished". When we had the strength we would argue, "nie, nie". But she kept on fighting. This was her Gethsemane and her willpower would not let her go easily.

Leokadia's trip to Poland had been a journey of fantasy from her real world on our prairie and became, as she lay dying, a "miraculous flight of fancy" in her recollections. "As far as one can imagine" she would repeat from the forward to her last book and that would seem to comfort her. "*W mikroskopie*", I remember her explaining ironically. "Like in a microscope", I concurred. "Tak, drogi synu", yes, dear son, she agreed. "Eternity is in the details" we chimed together softly this time but as always with a little laugh.

"In the old days they liked to think they knew it all when some uppity young *Polka*, like my genius Leokadia, came to write their language", Adam would say roughly sounding his Polish accent with the usually soft vowels and diphthongs. "Up to the fifties how could you tell those *duraki* so possessed of

their beloved English, that they didn't know a rat's ass (he said *szczura dupa*) from an iambic pentameter!" He used to tell us how when he came to Canada "they had been walking around in gumshoes and hair curlers right on Main Street. Matka Boska, Mother of God, they were backward until we came to bring them civilisation."

Adam used to proclaim, near the end that, "Leokadia is my HMW, high maintenance woman, like a movie star from Warszawa or the prima donna wife of the President of Poland, for Christ's sake." And she lacked the strength by then to castigate him for his blasphemy, which I suspect she secretly admired. She so loved him, and his seemingly unbreakable spirit.

I remember Leokadia marked her calendar at home compulsively. Her life had been so full of friends and events up to two weeks before she died. The saddest part of helping Adam clean out his house before he moved in with me was seeing her calendar and the empty weeks. I started crying right then, I was thinking of those weeks and the empty years ahead.

We walked up to the hospital desk and the nurse already recognised us as of the bereaved. How much practice does it take to walk steady when the earth is shifting? The nurse had called us just as we were getting our second sleep that night (why couldn't we have just stayed with her!) We are Leokadia's people; Adam could not say a word.

Leokadia had waved us away the previous evening like she always had. "*Idźcie spać*, go to sleep" she had whispered with her weary eyes pointing at the

clock. We had all dutifully hugged her and whispered to her sweet words and left for the night. Her flock well cared for; it was our rest she was concerned about.

Months later, on a rare night of good sleep, I had a powerfully comforting dream. I dreamt of a blazing candle on the table at the cabin shooting off rays of light like electricity. The sense of it was overwhelming but I did not want the dream to end. I had always been suspicious of my odd dreams and when I had brought them to Leokadia as a child she claimed I got them from her side, like her and her grandfather and his grandmother and not to worry. When it came to the mystical I remember her as a veritable theologian; Leokadia might have given Thomas Aquinas a few tough questions. I took this dream vision of the arcing candle as a comfort.

And now it seems like it's been a long time since she left us. I dream of her in that cabin surrounded by a cold winter that cannot touch her and has absolutely no power over her. She will be there all our winter through, until our own ends. "*Kochajmy się*, let us love one another", I repeat one of her dictums to myself when Adam becomes too sullen or Basia weeps uncontrollably.

It had been a long cancer and she had fought and we fought with her all the way. Only on one of the last days when Leokadia had cried out for help to her distant brothers and sisters in Poland did we too know in our hearts that the end was close.

And with her last breath...she joined the mountain goat, the *Biały Baran at Zakopane*. *That is the snow white goat only the dying can see and he meets you in a laid-by meadow off the steep and treacherous path when your breath is hard*

*to catch, the labouring effort of dying. The dead of the mountain people live in the clouds, among the peaks. You may visit a shrine on a mountain road to pray to your ancestors. It always has a cross and a candle and flowers and the goat's horn that reminds you this worship goes beyond the Christian era, is much older. If you go on a cloudy day you hope you don't meet your Biały Baran too soon, off some cliff rapt in sightseeing or the narrow path. If it clears up while you are praying, as especially there the mountain weather seems so changeable, you come down to the plain with a rough joy and tired from your climb and exuberant in relief that you have not been chosen yet.*

Adam is tall but now seems to have no depth, like our city when you look over the prairie at its skyscrapers on a bright, well-lit day. It looks like a movie backdrop, held up by some crane. Adam, at times, says he is a ghost. From this crossroads he seems not to know how to go. For our sake, at times (I could tell I think), he stopped himself from saying he hoped it would not be too long — that his journey from here would not be far.