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Vodka and knife. Song of Drowning

Novel

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In 1967, when Kuba turned seven, Aunt Ala lost her left eye at her own wedding in Wilimy. It was late summer, just before the heather harvest. Like all the former East Prussians who hadn't managed or seen fit to emigrate to Germany after World War II, Kuba's father Adelbert Dernicki worked at the fishery in Najdymowo, a village on the far shore of Dadaj Lake. In a vodka-fueled frenzy he'd stabbed his own wife as well as the groom in the belief that the two of them had topped off a long series of secret trysts by screwing in a dark closet at the wedding. In rage, impotence and despair Ala had flung herself on her brother-in-law with a fork in her hand and tried to ram it into his neck. Fighting back, Kuba's father injured Ala's left eye with his knife. If Adelbert's cousins hadn't come between them, they would have killed each other for sure. The cousins freed Aunt Ala, thrusting her into the arms of their wives, overcame the knife-wielding drunk and locked him in the cellar, where he had to spend the night. Meanwhile, Aunt Ala had fainted; after she'd been patched up and came to again, she was unable to utter a word. Silent, with bandaged head and eye, she sat on a chair outside, staring at a rotten August apple gorged on by caterpillars in the grass at her feet. She didn't even complain about the injury and the pain. The corpses of the knife victims were taken to the cold storehouse where the fish were usually kept. That same evening Father Kazimierz tried to take Adelbert Dernicki's confession, but gave up his efforts in disgust an hour later; his little sheep, as he called Kuba's father, had completely ignored him. Kazimierz got into his *Warszawa*, rolled down the window and shouted to the bride's parents that he would hold a magnificent requiem for the two knife victims, one such as the world had never seen. All find eternal life in Jesus Christ! Even the criminal and his victims!

The police in the countryside were lazy, and always hard to convince of the pressing nature of an emergency, what with all the usual petty fistfights among notorious drunks. This was no exception; they didn't arrest Adelbert Dernicki until early the next morning, when he had already sobered up, and they were surprised to hear that he had murdered his own wife

and an innocent young man, none other than his old school friend Bogdan. All night long Adelbert had bellowed like a fatally wounded animal, not a man: “What have I done? Oh God! What have I done? Oh God!” he whimpered as he was led away in handcuffs.

Adelbert went to prison in nearby Barczewo to serve his life sentence in the same place as the former Nazi party leader of East Prussia, Erich Koch, whose original death sentence had been commuted due to serious illness. The prisoners spat at Koch’s balaclava’d head when he took his daily half-hour walk in the tiny courtyard. Any prisoner who failed to do so was branded as a Nazi and risked having a finger broken or a tooth knocked out, at worst being forced to perform fellatio.

Kuba was taken in by Renia and Kostek Podlichowie, his maternal grandparents from Warmia. He stayed in Wilimy with the Catholics, the Polish fishermen; as Kuba’s father, like all the Dernickis, had come from Najdymowo, where mainly Protestants lived and fished, the old war flared up again between the two families, one that their clans had been waging for generations. They wantonly destroyed each other’s motorboats, gillnets and driftnets, the men brawled in the pub and at celebrations, and the women spat at each other.

Najdymowo was where the devils lived, the nasty Germans, his grandmother told him once. Kuba should take care not to speak to them, she warned him; they didn’t go to confession, they’d murdered his mother, altogether they were just as devious as the Ukrainians and the Jews, and they’d always made lots of trouble at Dadaj Lake. The Najdymowo neighbors were smart alecks, constantly claiming to have the most powerful tractors, the biggest houses, the smartest school kids, the prettiest broads and so on.

When Kuba was just twelve years old, his grandparents took him to the doctor in Olsztyn. He had a fat belly that was completely atypical for his slight build, practically an insult. Once and for all they wanted to learn what this strange deformity meant. Could it be an enormous tumor? Kuba looked as if he were six months pregnant. He was carrying a ball the size of a watermelon. But he’d never complained of any pain, so at home and at school they’d left him in peace. He’d gotten used to his fat belly; the deformity goaded him on to excel at sports, successfully so in some of the events. No one could beat him at the 60-yard dash, and he had outstanding results in the long jump as well. His playmates were constantly teasing him that he was really a girl or even a hermaphrodite and that he’d been knocked up by Romanowski, the forest warden who’d killed himself and whose ghost was supposed to haunt the forest. “How come you never show us your dick?” his friends accused him. Meanwhile, the girls avoided Kuba entirely.

The doctor in Olsztyn took an x-ray and was so horrified and astounded that he took another one. When he showed Kuba's grandparents the negatives, they understood why the doctor was at a loss for words. He said he'd never even heard of a case like this, and it was little short of a miracle that the boy had gone so long in good health and without complaints. Kuba carried his twin in his belly, a full-grown, dead fetus, preserved like a mummy. The fetus had grown long hair and nails; his hair coiled around his head, and his eyes, wide open, were like two white snowberries. After the operation, which proceeded without complications apart from the press circus, Kuba acquired a nickname at school, *dwupepek*, two-navel; where his brother had been removed, a scar like a navel remained – the surgeon was a butcher and ought to be darning socks rather than operating on innocent kids, Kuba's grandparents fumed at the time – nonetheless, Kuba even earned money with this new belly. His friends were allowed to view his bare belly only for a small fee. Later he impressed girls with his incredible story as well, especially in high school and at the university.

Before the fetus could be buried, a conflict erupted with the authorities, who wanted to preserve Kuba's brother in formalin and display him for educational purposes in a famous university's curiosity cabinet. But thanks to Father Kazimierz's dedicated appeal to the authorities and the church, Kuba was permitted to christen his brother *Kopernik* – the name suggested by Grandpa Kostek. "Our great countryman! And what do we owe him?" he often asked his grandson. "God bless him – the first astronomer to wrest a bit of truth from the heavens!"