

Berlin

fiction by Karol Lagodzki

Robert sat between the curves. In Warsaw, he had wedged himself between the woman in the floral dress and the woman in the brown dress, having prayed away the prior six hours standing up in the hallway of the first-leg train from Augustów.

He named his companion to the left *Kielbasa*—sausage. The train hadn't trundled an hour out of Warsaw when she retrieved a bundle out of her canvas tote bag. Robert smelled the pork grease bleeding through the newspaper pulp before he saw the stains. And garlic—it was a top-quality smoked sausage. *Kielbasa* deposited the meat and a chunk of bread on the table by the window and proceeded to carve a slice off every twenty minutes, place it on a bit of bread, and chew it until the time came for the next bite.

Claudia, the woman to the right, roughly in her mid-thirties and twice his age owed her name to Robert's greatest crush, Ms. Claudia Cardinale. But it wasn't likely the lady pushing her hip into his and conducting her heat well into his midsection and groin was an actual Tunisian-French-Italian sexpot movie star. Probably a Tatar or a Gypsy, given her olive complexion and thick, dark brunette hair. *Claudia* sat quietly with her eyes fixed somewhere beyond the compartment wall.

By the time the train began to slow down before the border, *Kielbasa* had long run out of her snack and now busied herself sucking her lower lip when she didn't stand in the corridor smoking.

Claudia kept staring into space, and Robert wondered if she was quite all right. The cars ground to a halt almost exactly eight hours out of Warsaw.

"This is the worst part," said *Arek* from the seat across from Robert.

Robert nodded. He had been duly warned. When *Arek* talked him into investing in the trip, he was nothing if not clear: "The border crossing is all fucked up." *Zajebista*. The border between Poland and East Germany took no more than a couple of hours. No, *Arek* had meant the crossing into West Berlin.

"My turn to sleep," *Arek* said and squinted against a German afternoon sun. The sun felt no different from the Polish one.

Between the hips on both sides, radiating several kinds of heat—and a headache, probably dehydration—Robert couldn't have napped if immortality were the reward. He nodded, but *Arek* had already closed his eyes.

Arek had pitched the idea two months earlier, after cutting Robert's hair in front of his mother's kitchen sink in exchange for composition homework, and Robert had given him a congratulatory handshake. The Germans, those from the West, were well known for their insatiable appetite for carved Jesus figurines, Polish lace and pottery, and Russian leather boots. A duffel filled with pottery, cookware, lace, leather, and other precious wares rested above Robert's head, and now he set himself to guard it while *Arek* took his rest.

Was *Claudia* a Tatar or a Gypsy? No matter the effort, Robert didn't think he could force his body into the stillness she'd so long assumed. She had risen twice and walked out, probably to the lavatory, only to freeze again as soon as

her bottom rested right next to his.

He wondered if she'd borrowed her investment like he had. Or, if he were to be entirely honest, his mother had. "Mama," he said as soon as he walked in after his visit to Arek—his friend and barber—with his split ends banished. "I have an idea."

Mama had listened, pursed her lips, and began to shake her head, but Robert pointed to the wicker basket resting in its nook on the counter. It always sat right by the fridge. On paydays at the telephone station it overflowed with broken-in banknotes like a wheelbarrow full of autumn leaves fluffed up by headwinds of hyperinflation. By the nineteenth of each month, change jingled on the bottom.

His mother borrowed or begged for extra money, and a sunny July day two weeks later found Robert browsing the wares of the Belarussians, Russians, and Lithuanians at Augustow's open-air market with the capital in his pocket. He strolled with a duffel slung over his shoulder while enjoying a homemade lollypop.

In less than an hour, the duffel's strap began to cut into Robert's shoulder, weighed down by one-of-a-kind pieces of Bolesławiec pottery, crucifixes, a couple sets of enameled pots and pans, cutlery, a dozen or so bootleg movies, and a few other odds and ends which he thought would bring a good margin from the rich folks in West Berlin. The strap was going to leave a bruise, but Robert continued to walk and scan the wares laid out on covered tables, benches, and blankets spread on the concrete.

Robert wasn't going to leave without the one thing sure to send a Berliner's heart racing. He'd begun to lose hope when he saw them. Brown-like coffee whitened with vanilla ice cream, the boots looked just like the knee-high pair Claudia Cardinale wore in the set photos from *The Professionals*. Robert set

the duffel down and bent to touch the leather. He caressed it and judged it as soft as Claudia's boots must have been.

He raised his eyes to the woman in the red scarf. Her bent knees indicated a stool or a stack of bricks under her bottom, but her bottom, the size of Robert's duffel, made deciding between the stool and the bricks impossible. She sniffed.

"How much?" Robert said.

"Forty dollars," the woman said with the East on her tongue.

Robert closed his eyes to perform the exchange to the Polish zloty in his head. It was twice as much money as he had left. He did a bit more math.

"Thirty deutschmarks," he countered. The woman smirked.

"Forty dollars." The smirk was gone and the floating Russian sniffed again.

Robert stood up and hoisted the duffel back onto the bruise. He thanked the woman—"Spasibo"—and decided to start the trek home. He'd have to make do without boots.

As he was about to clear the last of the open-market throngs, Robert felt a tug on his elbow and came to a stop as rapidly as his bag's inertia allowed. A boy of no more than ten wiped his nose with the hand which wasn't holding a pair of Claudia Cardinale's boots.

"Thirty deutschmarks?" the boy said.

Robert nodded and said, "In zlotych, at today's exchange? Okay?"

After the boy had given his nod, Robert deposited the rest of his money in the snotty palm and wasn't surprised to see the kid dance away a couple of steps to count. With another nod, the boy put the boots on the ground and raced back into the crowd.

Now, the boots rested safely in the duffel riding above his head. Claudia's bag, made of red and white nylon, sat next to it, hip to hip. Arek had long since

woken up and now looked out of the window as if watching a passing countryside. Nightfall made for the only change in the past six hours: Neon bulbs came on in the railyard outside and made the Kalashnikovs of the strolling guards glint like dirty ice sculptures. The garb and the pacing of the border police continued to be uniform.

The knock on the door came before midnight, and two inspectors entered without waiting for an answer. "Passports," one said in Polish and the other followed in German. If Robert hadn't known they were still in the East, the red and the stars on their uniforms would have left no doubt about which of the Germanies they guarded.

No one needed to dig, and eight hands extended travel documents toward the door. All of the passports, but Claudia's, reflected the neons and flashlights in green. Hers was red and it declared itself in block Cyrillic letters. The guards left the compartment and closed the door.

"It's okay," Arek said. "They'll check them and bring them back."

"When?"

Arek shrugged and closed his eyes.

The door opened again an hour later, and the guards shone the flashlights on each of the faces before returning the matching passport. Claudia's came last, and instead of letting her have it, the guard waved it toward her bag. He pointed.

The other guard motioned Robert toward the window, and he obeyed. Claudia rose, pulled her bag off the shelf and let it plop down on the seat. She unzipped it and stepped back.

One of the guards moved forward while the beam of the other's flashlight plunged into the opening. The first of the men gutted the bag like a pig after slaughter—he brought out blouses, hose, skirts, black and red panties and bras, a solitary carton of cigarettes, and a framed

photograph of a boy of no more than ten. A son?

Claudia had frozen with fists by her hips. Her chest rose with each breath as if struggling to remind the body it was alive. A guard pinched a pair of red lace panties and lifted it up to the light. When he let it go, the lingerie tumbled like a broken parachute and covered the child in the frame. The guard smirked. He scratched his belly, threw Claudia's passport on top of the pile and walked out leaving his partner to close the door behind them.

With her eyes fixed on the bag, Claudia took each item and put it back like one might place a stitch on a wound. Last, she tucked the framed photograph into the middle, closed the zipper, and hoisted the duffel up. She sat down. When Robert sneaked a sideways glance, her eyes were closed.

Arek and Robert got out at Zoo Station at two in the morning.

Robert drank in the bright neon lights shouting Xerox, Barclays, Deutsche Bank, and dozens more brands. The late night, or early morning, let thousands of cars present their tail lights as if in courtship. Steady foot traffic filled the sidewalks.

"When do they sleep?" Robert asked.

"Let's get some coffee." Arek tugged at Robert's sleeve and set off up the illuminated street. He stopped two blocks later and waited while holding the glass door open. He motioned Robert through.

A few tall tables with stools filled the space presided over by a yawning barista behind a counter. His tattooed arms rested next to a machine branded with a gold relief spelling, "Tchibo."

"Zwei kaffee." Arek dropped a few coins and flicked one more into a glass jar where banknotes cushioned its fall.

Robert dragged both of their bags to a table and sat down. Arek joined him with two steaming cups and said, "Either we walk around and drink coffee all night or find a staircase to sleep. Staying awake is the better option."

"What about Zygmunt's place?" Zygmunt, Arek's cousin, had agreed to put them up for the night.

"Too late. This is the longest I remember this train taking. Don't want to wake him and burn any bridges."

Robert had no answer and lifted the coffee cup to his lips. Then he took another sip. He tasted freedom with a side of spice. Earthy, like land without borders, the coffee propped up his eyelids just as it fed his spirit. Robert smiled when no tartness came at the end. "Damn," he muttered.

Arek smiled and sipped his coffee.

An underground train took them to the open-air market soon after dawn. As they approached it, the passengers in suits gave way to men and women carrying duffel bags. Robert and Arek got off and navigated to the market by staying in the middle of the crowd aimed toward its destination like migrating salmon. When the field opened in front of them, Arek pulled at Robert's sleeve and motioned for him to follow.

They finally stopped almost all the way across the field, no more than twenty meters away from narrow streets leading into a neighborhood carrying its business signs like fangs. Neon lights pulsated in the shadows and most radiated red, pink, or purple.

"That's where the thirty-mark whores hang out," Arek said. "If you need to take a leak, nobody's going to bother you there." He took a blanket out of his bag and began spreading his wares on it. Robert observed long enough to get the idea and got to work.

He marked his pottery and kitchenware up two hundred percent. The knickknacks—four hundred. The movies—five. He paused at the boots. Well-made, solid leather—he pursed his lips—a hundred and ninety marks sounded about right.

By mid-morning, the Bolesławiec pottery had left for better homes with little haggling, and one of the pots and pans sets fetched close to an asking price. The movies struggled until he knocked them down by half. The crucifixes garnered decent interest.

No one asked about Claudia Cardinale's boots.

"Got to piss. Don't let anyone have the boots for less than 150," Robert nodded to Arek, and crossed the street into the red-light district. He sought a nook where he could unzip unbothered.

An alley the width of two wheelbarrows beckoned. Robert followed and turned a sharp corner before he heard the sound.

The man pumped with his bare buttocks. He wore a tight, black long-sleeved shirt and his narrow back couldn't obscure the woman whose one leg lent her support while the other floated up in the man's grasp. Her arms clutched him for support and her face rested on his shoulder. Claudia's patient eyes met Robert's and held his gaze as her dark hair bobbed with each thrust and grunt.

Her eyes gripped him until she covered them with black eyelashes. Robert swallowed; the burn of bile fought a stirring in his groin. Claudia's hair continued to keep the beat above her crumpled eyelids. Robert's soles anchored him to the asphalt until a moan of climax broke through the red-tinged fog of his heartbeat and allowed him to flee.

When Robert returned to his wares, he took a seat and told Arek to take his break. A pair of legs startled him and he followed the body up to the face

framed in Aryan, blond curls.

“Wie viel?” the woman asked, touching the boots. “Dreißig?” she offered with a ghost of a hopeful smile.

“Thirty marks . . .” Robert clenched his jaw and nodded.

He took the money and looked at his watch. There was a train home in two hours. ♦