



A Polish Winter Dream

By William Harcourt

This picture reminds me of a time in my life shortly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. I was a confident, young, excited newlywed executive in my mid-thirties who had proven himself to be dependable and trustworthy to the CEO. At his sudden order I was assigned to a secret project that began with a meeting in Frankfurt. The EVP, who was also the CEO's brother-in-law, considered me a rival and made certain that I knew who was in charge on the ground in Germany. I only knew a few of the facts and nothing of the reasons for the trip. Our primary contact was a Polish national named Roy who, as a younger man, had made a daring escape from the Russians through Eastern Germany to Paris where he hid before moving to the United States. It was Roy who urged the CEO to back this trip to meet Roy's contact, an Indonesian denim king named Yanto who was traveling from Jakarta and had offered to pay our expenses at the five-star Steigenberger Hotel Metropolitan. The CEO instructed me to take copious notes, arrive at my own conclusions and report them directly to him. An enraged EVP instructed me to pack for seven days and to keep my mouth shut the entire time.

Seven days turned into two years away from my beautiful wife. It was a scavenger hunt; the months spent traveling throughout Europe, the Baltic, Ukraine and other countries of the former USSR searching for buried treasure. Yanto accompanied us through eastern Europe, buying property, but he left abruptly when our ambitions grew bolder in Vilnius where my EVP introduced new companions. The city was notoriously occupied by the former KGB, now posing as communist-free businessmen. I learned quickly that these men were very dangerous profiteers from all points of Russia. They drove hijacked Mercedes S classes, wore flashy jewelry and spouted insane notions of wealth and gained influence over a concrete block world that was drenched in the stench of burning diesel fuel and the lowest grade of black market coal. A huge, red-sickled beast was dead and the jackals that had maimed it wanted all of the fat for themselves.

STUBBORN ROAD

There was one winter night outside Zielona Góra Poland: The group had grown to twenty men plus me and the EVP. The leader had reserved a former Party dacha for a weekend in the woods. When wild boar with horseradish and turnips was finished along with many bottles of Italian red wine, young prostitutes imported from Moscow entered the great room. I yearned for the comfort of another displaced soul; a solitary rendezvous in a mansion deep in the wonderland of frozen Poland where the endless, slow march of time would stand still for one night. A tall, thin, lovely woman with long dark hair wearing black stockings, garters and a bustier under a wool trench coat approached the table and sat next to me. She poured us wine and spoke quick Russian sentences, tugging at my sleeve. My head was tilted down and slowly shook back and forth. I said, "No, but thank you," as I showed her my wedding ring. She squeezed my hand and then raised my chin with two fingertips until our eyes met. In pleading broken English, she whispered, "Please, take me to America. I do anything. Please, please, take me to America." I looked away, through great leaded windows where outdoor lights illuminated the grounds. Massive conifers were swaying in the wind and snow was falling. All my life I had waited for a moment like this. I said, "A storm's coming..." but she didn't understand my words.

A disc jockey had arrived. Loud music was playing now. The men and the other prostitutes were drinking and laughing and shouting. We left the table together and as she turned toward the party I hesitated for a moment, then walked away from her toward the staircase that led upstairs to the bedrooms. Before ascending I looked back, wanting to remember her face, but she had already dissolved into thick air; dense with cigarettes and cigars and smoke from the fire. I saw only shadows: dancing shadows with squealing voices drunk and delirious from their capture of the KGB dacha in the dense Polish forest.

Those were interesting times