

West by East

With travel restrictions finally lifted in mid-1984, Poles were on the move again, each trying to find a way to escape the hardships. Among them was Jarek, Greg's brother-in-law. Instead of enduring the long lines for a passport, he opted for the old system of *po znajomości* or mutually beneficial liaisons. He met a "guy who knew a guy," a high-ranking officer within the passport office. Naturally, the official wanted something in return, but not from everyone. He was willing to assist only those with "good reasons to go abroad, not every brute who needed hard currency to buy new furniture segment or a small Fiat," as he put it. His price—Greg learned—was sex toys and "those funky condoms in different shapes and colors." Well, he was selective. As the queues at the passport offices grew longer, Greg was willing to consider the other option for the "reasonable people."

Greg's hesitation was dispelled after Candy's mother came to see him, swearing and screaming. She had suffered mini-strokes that impaired her speech and left her irritable, often cursing involuntarily. But this time, her outburst wasn't just because of that—the letter she handed him was more alarming: Candy had been expelled from her doctoral program.

Greg rushed to confront the Director. His office was in the *Palac Kultury i Nauki*, a gift from Stalin and an imposing structure in the very heart of Warsaw. The Director greeted Greg warmly, appearing well-prepared with Candy's file spread across his desk. He leafed through it as if reading but kept silent. When Greg asked about his letter, he shook his head, gesturing upward as if indicating those above him. Then, unexpectedly, he offered Greg tea and shifted from behind his massive desk to a corner table to prepare it.

As the electric teapot hummed and the Director noisily stirred sugar in the glasses, he mumbled something under his breath—reminiscent of a scene from a spy movie where someone tries to avoid a hidden microphone. It was spooky. Amid his loud proclamations about Candy’s violation of trust and the law, he whispered warnings. From what Greg could discern, Candy’s article on WWII emigration in the Chicago press had enraged someone “up there,” and if he were in Greg’s shoes, he implied, he would flee without looking back. Candy herself was at risk.

Scram! This was the message he conveyed between the lines of official condemnation. He even patted Greg on the shoulder and offered a tight-lipped, sympathetic smile as he escorted him to his door.

As Greg walked down the Stalinist corridors of high offices, he couldn't shake the feeling of eyes on him. Were they being watched? Had Candy stepped on the wrong toes? He pondered whether her return would put her in peril or even himself.

That same day, he reached out to the “sex toys guy.” Forget toys, he would give him a harem of sex dolls in exchange for a passport, now!