

A Polish Crossover

By Ewa Bronowicz

“This is for you,” Michael said as soon as he walked into the room. He handed her a red plastic bag with Flemish writing on it. His moustache quivered. He was dressed in a white bathrobe, his thin long hair wet from the shower. Agata inhaled the smell of soap and cologne. It made her feel dizzy.

She was in the guest room, sitting on a large bed with soft purple sheets, her head and back leaning against the wall, her legs stretched out. Across from the bed was a tanning machine, its aluminum bars glowing from the sun. A frizzy yellow curtain, flung to the side, exposed an open window. There was no door in the room, only two matching curtains that separated the guest room from Waylon’s bedroom. In thirteen days Agata would have to give it all up, go back to Rybnik.

She now moved to the edge of the bed. “What is it?” she asked, trying to keep a pleasant smile on her face, as if it was normal for her host to barge into her room in the evening when his wife and son were not at home.

Michael was Agata’s mother’s pen pal. They’d initially written letters for cultural exchange and to practice English. It turned out they were the same age. Last summer, Agata’s mother received an invitation, and this year, she secured one for her daughter. Agata arrived eight days earlier. To the West, to Belgium, to Waterloo. The place of Napoleon’s defeat, she knew that from her history class. Michel had picked her up from the bus station. He emerged from a green Mercedes like a superhero, lifted her backpack, and told her she was beautiful.

“Open it.” He now stood next to her. The white mini dress she was wearing, which she’d purchased in Rybnik especially for the trip with money squirreled away writing essays for her schoolmates, suddenly became too short. Agata covered her knees with a plastic bag and looked at the wooden floor. She suspected Michel was watching her.

It was Agata’s first time abroad, or rather, her first time in the West. The Czech Republic, where she’d gone on a school trip, was just like Poland, only with a funnier language.

“Waylon is having a sleepover,” her host said. Waylon, the couple’s son, was fourteen, looked twelve at most, and acted appropriately for both of them. “Open it,” her host repeated. His tone was more pressing, like a policeman’s or a father’s.

The bag was light. Agata thrust her hand in it and touched something soft. She knew what it was without looking. She placed the items on her lap. The bra was made of black satin lace embroidered with red velvet along the straps, as were the panties, high-cut and see-through.

“You can have it under one condition: if you put them on for me,” Michael said.

She looked up. His eyes reminded her of the eyes of stray dogs in Rybnik, begging to be fed. She stared at the lingerie. She’d recently discovered a red, see-through nightie in her mother’s dresser. She’d never seen her mother wear it. Agata tried it on, together with her mother’s black high heels. She applied make up to her face, red lipstick and rouge powder on her cheeks, and looked at herself in the mirror. Her brown hair covered her shoulders. Her legs looked long and slim. Even if her breasts were still too

small, Agata felt like a woman. She wondered who her mother would wear it for. Agata's father had long been gone. Was her mother seeing someone? Was the lingerie a present?

Now an older man gave Agata the lingerie.

She was fifteen, in love for the first time, with a boy two years her senior.

Mateusz was spending the summer at home, playing the guitar and writing songs.

Michael had made the first move a few days earlier. That morning, Agata walked to the bathroom through Waylon's room and through the master bedroom. She saw a naked body on the bed making fast movements with one hand, up and down, up and down. Agata wanted to turn back, pretend that she didn't see, but she was already half-way through; she crossed over to the hallway and hid in the bathroom. She was embarrassed, couldn't imagine facing Michael ever again. She'd intended to take a shower, but decided against it. What if Michael walked in when she was naked? She took off her t-shirt and wrapped her upper body in a towel. She ran the water in the sink. It was warm. She wetted her hair and then she heard a quick knock on the door and the door opened. In the mirror above the sink she saw him, in his white bathrobe, walking towards her. Agata lifted her head up, the water dripping from her hair.

"Hi," Michel said and stood there, as if that, too, was natural.

She hoped she wouldn't blush.

He approached her and tried to kiss her on the lips. She turned her head away, causing him to touch her cheek.

"I like you and I want to kiss you," he spoke again, in a tone she didn't know, playful, needy, as if drunk.

“No.” Mateusz was the only boy she’d kissed. They’d been dating for five months, and, though he didn’t insist, she’d resolved to lose her virginity with him after this summer abroad.

Michael looked at Agata, smiling. His real name was Michel but he instructed Agata to call him Michael instead. He said he didn’t like the feminine implications of his Flemish name. Agata had come to associate his long hair with Native Americans from the movie *Dances with Wolves*, from the days when she’d been obsessed with Kevin Costner. The Belgian Native American said, “I won’t leave until you let me have one kiss.”

She did, let him. His moustache bristled against her chin as he tried to insert his long tongue into her mouth. When he left, Agata didn’t wash her hair. She lathered and rinsed her face, then stood by the door listening for a sign of life downstairs.

If she called her mother, she’d be on the next bus back to Poland. If she told Michael’s wife Sylvia, she’d be on the next bus to Poland. Confiding in Waylon was also out of question.

Agata brushed her hair, walked downstairs, and smiled at Sylvia and Michael. They were sitting around the kitchen table, at opposite ends. Several bananas rested in a fruit bowl on the table. Agata had heard of bananas in Poland; they were a novelty and a luxury. On the day she’d arrived in Waterloo, she ate the fruit for the first time. It tasted sweet and smooth, like dessert.

In the kitchen, Agata poured coffee into a mug, a habit she’d developed in Belgium. She looked Sylvia over. Sylvia reminded her of the Barbie Agata’s mother had acquired, four years earlier, in Pewex, the only place one could buy western goods, exorbitantly priced. The Barbie was now on display in Agata’s room, lounging on a

bookshelf. Sylvia had a long Pinocchio nose and permed blond hair, like the Barbie. Sylvia's legs, too, resembled the doll's, long, smooth, brown and shiny like her whole body. She was wearing a jean mini skirt and a tank top. Sylvia's breasts were a lot bigger than Agata's. Why did Michael want her instead?

"Did you sleep well, Agata?" Sylvia asked. She was making a shopping list. Her lips were sparkling pink.

"Your lipstick looks amazing." Agata wanted Michel to notice it, to admire his wife's lips, her Barbie-like features. Michel was reading a newspaper and didn't even look up. Agata spread a thick layer of Nutella on a waffle, and just as she opened her mouth to bite into it, Michel winked at her.

Sylvia asked if steak would be okay for dinner. Agata said that sounded delicious. She had yet to find something she didn't like in the West.

The bus trip from Katowice to Brussels took eighteen hours. Crossing the invisible line between Eastern and Western Germany felt like travelling from the reality of Agata's small apartment to her fantasy world in which she lived in a castle. In Rybnik, people were always serious, suspicious even. Agata's grandfather, who'd fought in the Second World War, instructed her to hate the Germans. When Agata saw them on the shiny streets of West Berlin, in colorful clothes and smiling (smiling!), she forgot all about hatred. The woman sitting next to Agata on the bus said she felt like the Berlin Wall had fallen that very day, even though five years had passed since 1989. "My birthday is on November Ninth," Agata confided in her fellow passenger. That was the day the wall had come down. Agata watched the news with her mother that day. They were having chocolate cake, to celebrate her birthday. On TV, East Germans were

climbing the wall in ecstasy. Many cried when they crossed over to the other side.

Agata's mother said it was an omen: Agata was destined for a better life, in the West.

When the bus drove through Holland, Agata watched the yellow sunflowers that shone like gold. The windmills turned in the soft wind. Even the old Polish bus seemed to be moving gracefully, seductively. When the driver stopped, Agata used a public bathroom—free of charge. It was the first time in her life she didn't have to pay to pee. The bathroom was spacious, clean, smelling fresh like a spring perfume, with shiny mirrors covering the walls. In Poland, *babcia klozetowa*, a wrinkly old lady dressed in a smock and with an avaricious grin on her face, was on guard in every public restroom. She collected payments in coins and sparingly distributed toilet paper. It was embarrassing to ask for more. But in Holland, *babcia klozetowa* would be obsolete. A toilet paper dispenser hung in every toilet, a heavy-duty and industrial device, running out of paper was unimaginable. Six unused rolls stood there beside Agata, arranged on a wheel, waiting to be used. Agata used more toilet paper than she needed, and when she flushed the toilet, a blue liquid squirted into the bowl, with a dizzying smell of vanilla.

“The Berlin Wall didn't come down for nothing on your birthday” Agata's mother had written in a letter Agata received the day before. In Rybnik, they lived in a one-bedroom apartment in a block of flats, in a gray neighborhood of identical buildings with unattractive graffiti in front of which jobless men in nylon jackets drank beer when Agata walked to school in the morning, and who were still there when she returned in the afternoon. In front of Michael and Sylvia's house stood a garden with oak trees and daffodils. Their street was lined up with other creamy-white houses. Passing neighbors waved and smiled. Within a ten-minute drive there was a Carrefour, surely the largest and

most beautiful supermarket in the world. There was a shopping mall with more clothing stores in one building than Rybnik had in its entirety. The buildings looked freshly painted, the roads were wide, with no potholes. Shiny cars glided through them effortlessly. “Do everything you can to be invited back every summer,” Agata’s mother continued in the letter.

The day she received Michael’s gift, Agata returned to her bedroom after breakfast. She hid the lingerie on the bottom of her backpack, grabbed a book, and walked downstairs, into the garden. On the hammock, she wondered if she should abandon her plan to study literature in college and move to Belgium after high school. Her mother had a master’s degree in Russian Literature. She taught in a public high school and gave private lessons in the late afternoons to finance Agata’s private English lessons. Money was always tight, especially since Agata’s father had moved out. Michael, Sylvia and Waylon lived in a three-bedroom house. They had a Mercedes. They went out to restaurants. They vacationed in Spain and Greece. Michael had visited America, even Alaska. “You’re a zero without an education,” Agata’s Polish teacher, *pani Biedna*, kept on repeating. What about Michael and Sylvia? He’d quit college and worked in a factory, three nights straight with the next three nights off. She’d finished a trade school and worked as a barmaid, mostly night shifts. He drove a Mercedes. She bought new clothes every week.

Agata knew what to do. She wouldn’t tell anyone. But she wouldn’t undress for him either.

“I will not wear it for you,” she said to Michael the next morning, when he entered her bedroom again, this time wearing nothing but a T-shirt that barely covered his private parts.

He laughed and sat next to her on the bed. He sounded like a hooligan. Two or three years earlier Agata’s male classmates had smuggled her black cotton bra from the changing room during gym, and proudly raced around the school with it, shouting Agata’s name. Agata had been the first girl in her class to wear a bra.

“Keep it anyway.” Michael now touched her knee, then ran his hand up to her shorts. His hands were rough, bulky. Agata didn’t move. He stood up, and Agata saw his penis reaching out of the T-shirt. “I’ll imagine you wearing it and that will turn me on,” he whispered and left the room.

Agata stared at the moving curtain behind which his body disappeared. She heard his footsteps on the stairs, farther and farther away. If he’d said, “Wear it or don’t come back here again,” she would have done it, she would have had to. But he didn’t blackmail her. Once again, she examined the gift. To receive such an expensive and intimate thing, to be desired by an older man. Her body felt stiff, but she managed to smile a little. She would have a secret. A West European secret.

Agata lay on the hammock reading *Crime and Punishment*. Her generation was the first exempt from obligatory Russian language classes in high school. She studied English and French instead. Agata’s mother had encouraged her to read the English classics, but the girl insisted on Russian literature. Jane Austen’s female protagonists were too light-headed. The women from Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, Nabokov, those she

understood. They were like Agata, living in a complex world which often required them to choose from bad options only.

“Shopping in one hour?” Sylvia peeked out of the house. Agata nodded enthusiastically and wiggled her legs on the hammock. The yellow daffodils were blooming.

Agata loved to accompany Sylvia to Carrefour, to purchase cut up pieces of mango or pineapple, bananas, fresh steak which cost more money than Agata had brought with her from Poland, red and green and yellow candy for Waylon. Everything Agata saw was new and unavailable in Rybnik. At the shopping mall, Sylvia would have a cold beer or lemonade, and Agata, embarrassed by the high cost of the items on the menu, would ask for water, and only after Sylvia’s encouragement would she order what she really wanted—a warm waffle with vanilla ice cream, whipped cream and chocolate syrup on top. Later they would look at colorful clothes in stores with colorful walls in which the sales personnel looked at every customer with kindness regardless of whether they bought something. Some days Sylvia would buy Agata a dress or a top. Later at home, Michel would approve.

That evening, Sylvia was working. After dinner Michael suggested a ride to the bar, to visit her. Waylon was in the living room, browsing channels on TV.

“You should come,” Agata urged the boy.

“Why do you care?” Waylon asked. He didn’t look at her. He was rarely at home; they’d barely exchanged a few words since her arrival. He had his mother’s eyes, large and green, and his father’s oval face. He might grow up to be a handsome man.

Michael’s voice reached them from the kitchen. Were they ready?

“You could tell us about your camp,” Agata insisted. Waylon spent his days at a local summer camp.

“My father is waiting for you.” Waylon’s tone sounded annoyed, angry even.

The bar was dark and cozy, with wooden stools around the counter. Sylvia was pouring beer into a tall glass and saying something to a customer. Michael pulled out a stool for Agata, and one for himself. Sylvia smiled when she saw them. She asked about Waylon. Michael said the boy wanted to watch TV.

Sylvia was wearing her new pink jean skirt, and a white tank top. Agata had helped her pick the skirt at the mall earlier that day. Michael asked for a beer and a Malibu with pineapple juice.

“For Agata?” Sylvia stared at her husband. Her lips were still sparkling pink. Agata hoped Michael would compliment Sylvia’s outfit. In the car, he’d told Agata he loved her new dress, a gift from Sylvia. It was shiny silver, strapless, and reached just above her knees.

“She’s on vacation.” Michael reasoned with his wife. His hair was tied in a ponytail. He wore jeans and cowboy boots. His arms were hairy and muscular.

Sylvia placed the drink in front of Agata. “Only one,” she said.

Agata had drunk wine and vodka before, at parties with her classmates and with Mateusz in her apartment when her mother was away—but never in a bar, with grownups. Michael treated her like a woman.

A day later, Agata sat next to Waylon in the back seat of the Mercedes. Michael was humming a song Agata didn’t know. The boy spoke Flemish. Sylvia, who always

asked him to speak English in front of Agata, answered in Flemish. They were on their way to visit Michael's parents, who lived on the opposite side of Waterloo.

"Next summer there might be an opportunity to work in a greenhouse. Tomato-picking," Michael interrupted Sylvia, and glanced at Agata in the rearview mirror.

"You'd probably make more money than your mother does teaching all year."

Waylon said something in Flemish again. Sylvia expressed concern about Agata's age. Wasn't she too young to work?

"I'll be sixteen in November," Agata defended herself. She could buy presents for her mother, her grandparents, Mateusz. She could buy dresses and shoes. More money than her mother made in a year.

Waylon laughed. "Next summer is a long time away," Sylvia said. Just the other day she'd told Agata she'd love to have her back. What happened? Did she suspect something about Michel and Agata? Did Waylon say something to Sylvia about last night?

Nothing had happened last night. Michael kissed Agata in the car, in front of the house, when they returned from the bar. Waylon couldn't have seen that. He was watching a movie.

Andries, Michael's father, was in the garden when they arrived. He was wearing a striped shirt and brown shorts, his sunglasses resting on his forehead, and he held a butcher's knife in his right hand. His gray hair made him look wise. "I was waiting for you," he said, looking at Agata and Waylon. "You can watch me kill a rabbit."

There were six or seven rabbits in a large cage behind him. Agata had petted, fed, and played with a few of them before. She didn't want them to die. Andries approached the cage. He put his hand inside and jumped up, shouting something in Flemish.

"You swear!" Waylon pointed out. Michael corrected his son's English, changing the verb to the past tense.

Andries returned to the group, holding a rabbit in both his hands. It was the one Agata had secretly given a cookie to a few days before, because his eyes seemed to be talking to her. He was black, with white paws that looked like tiny shoes. He must have tried to resist. She noticed Andries' right arm with a big scratch and fresh blood on it. She wondered whether the rabbit knew what was about to happen to him.

She didn't want to watch, but she remembered her mother's words. "Do everything you can" and "The Berlin Wall didn't come down for nothing on your birthday." Andries now held the rabbit in his left hand and picked up a long knife with a shiny blade with his right hand. The rabbit squirmed desperately, his whole body moving up and down, trying to find a way to escape. Agata secretly cheered for the animal, but his fate was already sealed.

"Your first time?" Andries asked.

"Yes, my first time," Agata nodded. She tried not to look at Michael who was standing so close to her she could smell his cologne, strong and sharp. Waylon sat down on a bench, playing a video game. Andries gestured to Michael who in a swift movement grabbed the rabbit's head. The old man positioned the knife in the direction of the animal and slit its neck. Blood poured onto the grass, the rabbit trembled, Michael smiled, and his father repeated the action—he slid the knife once again. The rabbit stopped moving.

Agata noticed blood on Michael's gray T-shirt. The two men started to take off the fur and "prepare it for dinner." Agata thanked them for the demonstration, and quickly walked into the house. Sylvia and Inneke, Michael's mother, both spoke Flemish in low voices. They stopped when they saw Agata.

Inneke wore a simple cotton dress that reached slightly below her knees. Michael inherited his hazel eyes from her. She asked if Agata was enjoying her stay in Waterloo. At the dinner table, Agata assured her that she was. Michael nodded. He'd changed into a short-sleeve shirt, and said the rabbit was delicious. It tasted like nothing she'd tasted before, its texture was rough and required a good deal of chewing. She wished she didn't have to eat it. She'd told herself that killing a rabbit was a part of the West European tradition.

On the way back, when Michael dropped Sylvia at work for the night shift, she asked what his plans were for the night.

"Go to bed," he said.

She said goodnight to Waylon and to Agata, then slammed the car door. In the back seat, Waylon glanced at Agata. They drove in silence. Michael pulled the car in front of a brightly lit house. Waylon said "bye" and grabbed his backpack. Michael asked Agata to move to the front seat. Waylon rang the bell. The door opened, and the boy disappeared inside. Agata complied, but, for the first time, she felt like she'd stolen Sylvia's place. She asked Michel if Waylon had more sleepovers since her arrival than normally. Micheal nodded. "He's a good boy." They passed the Carrefour, which was still fully lit. In Poland everything was closed on Sundays. Agata decided she'd have to be nicer to Waylon. Perhaps he wasn't a child anymore either.

“What if Sylvia and Waylon think we are...?” Agata didn’t finish.

“I can’t stop thinking about you.”

At home, Michael dropped the car keys on the kitchen table, and offered Agata a drink. She refused. He poured vodka into a shot glass, and gulped it down.

“Wait here,” he said, and walked away. Agata heard his footsteps upstairs. She turned on the light in the living room, and sat down on a leather chair. She was wearing a colorful summer dress Sylvia had bought for her in the mall, short, with blue lace on the bottom. Michael returned downstairs in his white bathrobe. This time, he poured the vodka into two shot glasses, and passed one to Agata. He sat cross legged on the couch across from her, looking at her. “You are sexy,” he said, and raised his glass.

Agata raised her glass too, swallowed the vodka, and stood up. “I feel sleepy,” she feigned a yawn. She wished Michael goodnight.

He laughed. “The night is young.”

In four days Agata would be on the bus back to Rybnik.

“If you’re worried about Sylvia and Waylon, I’ll take care of them,” he added.

Agata climbed the stairs. Up in her room, she took off her dress and bra. She’d keep her panties on, just in case. She lay down on her stomach in the tanning machine. She pushed the power button. The bright light was blinding. Agata wanted to return to Rybnik with a perfect tan.

Had she done anything wrong? She didn’t enjoy Michael’s kisses. She had no choice. No better choice.

She knew he’d follow her upstairs. She directed her head towards the yellow curtain that separated the guest room from Waylon’s bedroom. The curtain swayed.

Agata shivered. She looked at the crack between the curtains, and saw a finger and then a fist finding its way inside. When he peeked in, their eyes met. He opened the curtains and walked in. He untied his bathrobe and threw it on the floor, without taking his eyes off her.

She thought of Sonya from *Crime and Punishment*. The girl had to prostitute herself to help her family. Agata wondered if she should ask if Michael had meant what he said, about working in a greenhouse next summer.

He was skinny, with bony ribs. Agata remembered that her father's hips were much wider. She tried to stare at Michael's stomach as it was approaching, closer and closer, until she saw it again. His penis was pointing at her. "You know what I want," he said. He touched her back, her buttocks, then the inside of her thighs. She trembled. His voice tense, he said, "Go on your bed—naked."

Agata froze for a minute. The Berlin Wall, public restrooms with never-ending toilet paper, life in Poland, life in Belgium, the rabbit's eyes just before he died, and her future which was happening right there, in a room with curtains instead of a door and a naked man with a hard-on—all those images raced together in circles, dancing in her head.

She rose from the tanning machine, covered her small breasts and walked across the room to her bed. She instinctively reached for a towel on the floor, but didn't pick it up. He'd get angry. She had to act like an adult, she had to listen to him and obey him because he had the power—he was from the West, he was a man, he was older—and she was powerless, a poor Pole with no prospects unless she returned to Waterloo—and that if she did this, one day she, too, would be the powerful one.

She took off her panties and lay on her back. Her body was hot and sweaty from the tanning machine.

Michael lay next to her and gently caressed her stomach. His rough hand travelled down her body. "I won't tell anyone, not even mother," Agata said. She wanted him to know that she had understood. His hand froze, then moved away.

"You are a virgin," he said. "A child." He rested his head on the pillow.

She wanted to tell him that it was okay, that she was no longer a child, but she couldn't say a word. She glanced at his hairy chest, his tanned shoulders. He looked sad, as if he had just heard some terrible news, and she felt sorry for him. She gently kissed him on the lips. The moustache tickled her mouth. For a moment, his eyes sank into her body. He turned away. "You can slap me now," he whispered. She didn't understand the meaning of "slap." Had he given up? She knew that she was now the powerful one and he the powerless and that he depended on her and not the other way around and she thought of the rabbit, also powerless, and swore to herself that she would never again allow herself to be like that, and she kissed Michael again, this time deeper and with her body closer to his, and five minutes later she lost her virginity to a man from the West.

"Has Michael tried to kiss you?" Sylvia asked her the morning after. Michael was at work, Waylon at camp. Sylvia, in pajamas, sipped coffee and looked at Agata. Her hair looked messy.

Agata's neck felt stiff. She shook her head. She was in a bathing suit, about to lie in the sun.

"Would you tell me if he did?" Sylvia's voice quivered. "If he did anything? Touch you?"

Agata reached for one of the bananas from the fruit bowl. She'd bring some back to Rybnik, as gifts.

She stood facing Sylvia. There were no good options. And yet, she had to choose. She wanted to be honest, beg Sylvia's forgiveness. Would Sylvia divorce Michael and invite Agata back next summer?

Agata glanced at the banana in her hand. She looked up, straight into Sylvia's eyes. She explained that she would never hide anything from her, that Michael was like a father to her, Sylvia like a second mother, and that, of course, if anything did happen, she would tell Sylvia right away, but nothing would ever happen, nothing of the kind Sylvia was suggesting, because Michael was like her father, and he would never touch Agata, and if Waylon had mentioned something to Sylvia, well, the boy might have felt a little jealous, since Michael and Sylvia were spending so much time with Agata, so they'd all have to make sure to be more attentive to the boy, who was, by the way, so mature for his age.

Sylvia's lips gradually shaped into a smile. She opened her arms and hugged Agata. "Perfect day for sunbathing," Sylvia whispered.

Agata peeled the skin off the banana, took a bite, and strolled into the garden.

On the bus back to Poland, she'd think of her night with Michael as the second fall of the Berlin Wall. She'd be back next summer. Michel had already confirmed the invitation, and Sylvia agreed.