



A New Life

By Ewa Bronowicz

I loved America. I loved it with a vigorous intensity of my Polish heart. I loved it with a hope that could move mountains. I loved it even before my favorite black boots stepped on the American soil. It was, then, what I called love before first sight, I thought and smiled to no one and nothing in particular. My heart was beating fast, much faster than the train, which was going with a traditional slowness. I was on my way to the American Embassy in Krakow to apply for a visa. Despite the early morning and hardly any sleep the night before—I'd had to get up at 4am to catch the 5am train from Nedza, my hometown, to Katowice and then to change to another train—I felt energetic and ready to fly to America that very day, straight from the Embassy. Gazing through the window, I saw cornfields covered with a thin layer of snow and empty farms slowly waking up to the new day. I looked at my watch. It was 7:30am, which meant another twenty minutes or so until we'd reach Krakow. I'd be at the Embassy by 8:30am; my appointment was at 10 sharp. I'd been told to go early. The endless lines in front of the American Embassy were famous, because a visa was a pass to a better world, but only few would be privileged to receive such a pass, mainly because many of those who did never returned to their homeland despite their assurances that they would. I'd heard that many people were rejected, sent back home empty-handed, with their hope diminishing after every rejection, because if you were rejected once, it'd be nearly impossible to prove what was a lie in most cases—that you'd return to Poland before your visa expired. I will die if it happens to me, I thought and decided to once again, for the hundredth time, review my speech. "I have recently graduated from high school, and would like to go to America for a year in order to improve my English and discover the American culture. As an Au Pair, I will live with the High Family, help them with their children, and attend a college. After I return to Poland, I will attend the Jagiellonski University in Krakow, as an English major." I paused. In general, lying went against my upbringing, but it was accepted in one circumstance—when lying to trick the government. My parents, who'd lived under the Soviet rule, taught me that the government doesn't want to hear the truth—it wants to hear what pleases it. So I would lie, without moral scruples. Besides, not everything in my speech was a lie. I was going to America as an Au Pair, and I did used to plan on studying in Krakow, before the dream about America changed my life. They have to believe me, I thought. I got off the train and I headed to the place where I would or would not receive a key to my destiny.

I was nineteen years old, just a few days after celebrating my birthday. My pride was the piercing blue

eyes inherited from my grandfather. I had long brown hair that curled itself at the ends, otherwise remaining straight. I was slim except when I watched American movies such as "Pretty Woman" or "Bodyguard" where Hollywood actresses undressed in front of the camera to display their shiny bodies with full breasts and narrow hips and long legs. Sometimes after watching an American movie I would decide to go on a diet, a decision which would always end in fiasco because my grandmother, whom I saw every other week if not more, would feed me large portions of bigos and mashed potatoes and szarlotka for dessert, and if I refused to eat it all she would get upset and later complain to my mother, who would gently scold me, all of which in return made me forget the Hollywood movies. I was the only child and my grandparents called me a princess. I didn't think of myself as stunning, although by the end of high school I'd had a few admirers and an ongoing long term relationship with a boy three years my senior, a fact my grandfather didn't and wouldn't come around to accept. The elegant look required for the Embassy, however, did not do me justice, I felt—it wasn't comfortable, partially because I was wearing my mother's long black skirt, which was a little too wide for me. I'd wanted to buy one that suited me better, but could not find anything that I could afford. At least I was proud of my white collared shirt and a new black suit jacket, both of which I'd requested and received for my birthday. Due to the cold winter weather, I had to cover the new treasures with a thick navy jacket reaching as far as my knees, and with a long blue shawl. Having left in a rush that morning, I'd forgotten my gloves, and now regretted it. As the folder of documents did not fit in my small, "American-style," as I was told, purse, I was forced to carry them in my hand, and ended up alternating between the right and the left hand, while warming up the temporary free hand in my pocket.

I knew Krakow well from the numerous trips to the theatre that both my school and my mother's school—my mother was a Polish teacher—took every several months. I loved theatre, and already dreamed about Broadway, its splendor and its magnificent performances. I imagined myself inside a fancy theatre, sitting in one of the first rows, and watching an inspiring performance in New York. Afterwards I'd go to a café or a bar and discuss the moral choices or Hedda Gabler or Lady Macbeth with a new bevy of friends. I was just about to picture my new friends when I stopped on the sidewalk. I'd just entered the street on which the Embassy was, and saw a thick row of people extending through at least five other buildings. It can't be that, I decided and briskly searched for number 81. The closer I got, the more confidence I lost. At

last, I saw a sign announcing "The American Embassy." The line was, in fact, the line to the Embassy, and it was, in fact, much longer than it first seemed, as it curled up in circles in the middle.

"Is this the line to the American Embassy?" I asked the last person in line, knowing the answer but hoping I was wrong. The woman, in a pink coat and matching pink lips, openly examined my clothes, snared, and then said, "What else do you think it is?" Her voice was harsh and low, and I would have given her 70 years old had I heard her on the phone, in place of a rough 50. She looked like a ghost or like a clown whose bright make-up would have perhaps complimented her 30 years ago. Despite her obvious effort, the pink lipstick, thick mascara, rouge on the cheeks, and a handful of powder spread unevenly on her face didn't manage to hide her pale complexion and numerous wrinkles under her eyes and chin. My grandfather always said that women who wore heavy makeup were whores, and so, following his formula, I decided that she should not be allowed to enter the United States of America. Why would America want a woman who was old and so embarrassed about it that she ridiculed herself trying to hide it?

The ghost-clown aside, I wondered how I could make the appointment on time with so many people in front of me. Cutting the line would have been the best option had it been possible without getting killed by the vicious looking crowd. Worst of all, the Embassy wasn't even open yet—its business hours began at 9am, that is in approximately 10 minutes. I noticed there were already three people standing behind me. Two old women and a man, presumably a husband of one to one of them. I overheard their conversation. "We got up at 3 this morning, had to take a bus from Branice to Katowice, and then a train to here. We have an invitation from our daughter. She lives in Chicago," said one of the women. Her face was wrinkled and her head was covered with the traditional scarf. The other one, also wearing a head scarf, answered, "Oh, this is nothing. Last time I was here at 6 in the morning, and finally got inside at noon, but they refused me the visa. Said I didn't have enough proof. Now I'm back, but the train broke, so there was an hour and a half delay." The three of them nodded, and proceeded in silence. I wanted to scream. I had an hour to make an appointment that would take me six hours to get to.

My life was over.

The door to the Embassy opened, and a tall soldier with a rusty voice spoke through a speaker, "Do not stand in front of the Embassy doors, people. The line is to be formed on the other side of the street. Move!" Obediently although unwillingly the crowd shifted to the directed spot. The soldier waited and then added, "All those who have an appointment for today follow me." I couldn't believe my luck. I almost cried a second ago, and now I couldn't have been happier. I walked to the door, and noticed that only about twenty people did the same. The soldier checked our notices, compared the names on the notices to the names that appeared on our passports, and let us inside. At that moment I loved him.

The inside was a long hallway with a golden and red carpet which I imagined to be expensive and definitely American. We were led to a small waiting room with two chairs which were immediately given to the oldest people in our group, man of about seventy and a woman probably ten years younger. They weren't together, although I thought they would have made a nice couple. No one talked, because, as I'd assumed, no one wanted to risk saying too much, giving away some secret information, or even giving others ideas about how to best prove that they would not stay in America for fear that their ideas would be stolen and then used. It reminded me of Orwell's world. The silence gave me a chance to yet once again review my speech. After about forty minutes, passed in fear and resentment flying around the room like an annoying fly—what if you get a visa and I don't—my name was called.

"Wanda Ofiara," said a voice coming from everywhere and nowhere at the same time. I looked around, trying to locate it, but there was no one in sight except for two soldiers guarding the door to the interview room. They both stood straight, looking up to the ceiling, so it couldn't have been them. As I went through the door, the same voice directed me to window number 2. I suspected there was a hidden camera in the waiting room, and behind it a government official monitoring everyone, checking for unpatriotic remarks or unpatriotic smiles. I entered a room with four windows separating the applicants from the interviewers, and tried to look as Polish as possible, whatever that meant. There were 3 people from my group

standing in front of 3 of the windows, two silent and one, a young man, explaining something with his whole body, almost raising his voice. I headed to the free window, where I saw a chubby woman behind the glass.

I felt cheated. I'd put so much time into dressing up, and now I couldn't even take my jacket off and would have to stand behind the window as some fat woman interviewed me. I comforted myself that it was better to look unfashionable before a woman, because that way she wouldn't resent me out of jealousy. "Hallo," I said neutrally. "Your documents," said the woman, ignoring my good manners. I quickly took out my invitation from the High family. The woman had short blond hair, certainly a dye, I'd decided, and large glasses that rested on her nose, only half covering her eyes. Her cheeks looked heavy and full, as if she were caught in the middle of breakfast, and I imagined them falling off and landing inside my passport which would then have to be exchanged which would delay my interview and possibly cancel my trip because The Highs needed a nanny "right away." But the woman's cheeks seemed stable enough as she examined my passport with one stamp to Belgium, one to Germany, and several to the Czech Republic. "Why do you want to go to America?" Because it's a Promised Land. "In order to improve my English, learn the culture, and gain new experiences before I enter a university." "Which university?" Any, as long as it's in America. "The Jagiellonian University, where I will major in English." "And how long are you planning to stay in the United States?" As long as my little heart desires, which is roughly forever. "For a year only, of course. I want to continue my studies in Poland afterwards." The woman paused, looked at me, either suspecting or not suspecting the stress she was putting me through, and then calmly stamped my passport. "Good luck," she said, and for a second I thought she had blinked at me, but it must have been an optical illusion caused by her glasses. I wanted to hug her and tell her that despite her too many kilograms she could make herself pretty, even if I wasn't able to picture it. "Thank you," I replied quietly, afraid that I would scream if I raised my tone of voice.

I was stunned at how fast the interview went. I looked at the stamp

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