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A Week in Paradise

ExtaZ
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The sky above Berlin glows as if polished by careful German hands…

Sounds flat, Vladko thinks. Pure kitsch. A sky is a sky—nowhere does it say *Made in Germany*. He gazes again at the tangle of steel scaffolding, construction cranes, and advertising panels, which barely leave room for the little patch of sky he sees from the train window.

Germany… The word feels unfamiliar, almost reverent, especially after years of being taught to call the place by mockingly clipped initials… GDR. FRG. BRD. Is it coincidence they all sound so similar? Nonsense. Enough of this Balkan suspicion. If no one's around to ruin our peace of mind, we do it ourselves.

"A dark man with a burning torch ran down the street on a dull night in late autumn."

There it is again. Since morning, this phrase has been spinning in his head like a pop song hook. Where did it come from? He shakes his head, trying to scatter the word-mosquitoes. Ever since *perestroika* fell out of fashion, he's hardly read anything Russian. Not very Western of him, after all. And yet the words are powerful, no denying it—darkly ominous, with a monotonous rhythm that conjures up visions of hobnailed boots echoing on wet cobblestones… Russia. USSR. And here we are again, back at the ugly abbreviations. Habit, after all, is a second nature.

His brother is already rushing ahead—any moment now he'll start getting restless, but that's how it is with him. A man with a beard needs a comb. Teodora pretends not to notice, but she's also starting to hurry—soon she'll be sulking that she didn't have time to fix herself up. Like everyone else, she's torn between curiosity and fear, doing her best to delay the moment of contact. And let's be honest—this is Berlin. Not just East Berlin, but all of it. East or West, take your pick, go where you please. No wall. No secret police. Freedom, brother. The West.

Boyan paces impatiently outside in the corridor, the day's first cigarette smouldering in his hand. From time to time he pokes his head through the compartment door, snorting nervously but saying nothing.

Christ, going to the baths with a child… Look at Teodora primping in the mirror—you'd think we were visiting the Queen of England, not Mitko from Novi Pazar. But that's women for you. Try to get anything done and it's tears all around.

Still, she's my brother's wife. And women are meant to be beautiful, aren't they? Otherwise who would write poetry about them? Not that I should talk—what do I know about women? If I understood them so well, would I be a forty-year-old bachelor? And Vladko, the way he dawdles—sits there playing servant while the bride gets dolled up. He won't even say a word to her like a proper man, make it clear who's who in this house.

Ah, forget it. No point getting worked up so early in the day—my stomach'll be in knots all afternoon…

I've never seen two brothers so different, Teodora thinks, as she dabs rouge onto her pale cheeks. The older one is brash, the younger shy and timid. One's a macho, the other needs shelter and encouragement. Even their looks don't match—Boyan is swarthy and black-haired, stocky, all muscle and nerve; Vladko is fair, short and slim, his hair already thinning at thirty. The Moor and the Danish prince—brothers? Sounds like a failed dissertation topic.

She continues her makeup, patiently enduring Boyan's prickly glares. When word of the marriage began to spread through the faculty, no one wanted to believe it. Teodora and Vladko? Beauty and… the little beast? Whispering, sideways glances, snide remarks… Office gossip. But every miracle lasts three days—five, if you count the weekend. People got used to them. We're all one big family, after all…

Writer. She's always found that word oddly attractive, though of course she'd never admit to something so snobbish. A colleague who'd just returned from a sabbatical claimed that most writers in Mexico carry revolvers. Otherwise their numbers would drop dangerously. Well, at least down there they value talent. What better recognition for a writer than to be sentenced to death? If you don't believe it, ask Ayatollah Khomeini.

She smiles at her reflection in the mirror. Bitter jokes—what else is left to us? Then gives the compartment a final glance. One an aspiring writer,

the other a seasoned realist, and both with their heads in the clouds. If she doesn't keep things in check, they'll lose even their underpants. Look at this—again they've forgotten to check the luggage rack. And later it'll be: "Where's my hat?" But when it comes to conquering Germany, they're all talk. For two days now it's been the same—what kind of car to buy, the model, colour, year, everything… Well, mostly it's Boyan talking. Vladko just agrees—as usual. That's how it always is: next to his brother, Vladko seems to disappear, wiped off the map like a former Soviet republic. Hm. In any case, he's always ready to agree with anything. And who could blame him? The big brother is the one who gets things done. This whole trip wouldn't have happened if it weren't for him. Visas, money, documents—it all lands on their laps like a banquet tray. Boyan waves it off—wedding gifts, even though the wedding was a year ago. Besides, he's the only one of the three who speaks German. And not badly, either, though he's never studied it formally. Claims he picked it up at the seaside. Who knows?

Enough. They're good guys after all—no need to provoke them further. She grabs her rucksack and steps into the corridor (Boyan has finally gotten used to not helping her; Vladko already knows she doesn't like that sort of thing). Germany… Oof, even the name hits her in the face like a strong wind. Every time, she has to brace herself not to flinch.

They're already hurrying ahead—those two mountain men. Still Balkans at heart. Ah—now they've run into the old lady with the dozen bags. Like it or not, now they're baggage porters. Serves them right.

Vladko groans under the weight of a tattered suitcase bearing a large "FRAGILE" label, listening to the bottles clink inside. Honestly, opening a distillery in Berlin would've been easier than hauling this much rakia across the border. Or maybe it's jars? Compotes? Lutenitsa? Pot calling the kettle black—their own bags are stuffed with liquid treasures. What else do you bring from Bulgaria? Blue flags? Newspapers full of naked girls and printed swearwords… Look at us, brother—we can do it too. Democracy, no joke…

Boyan, ever the rough type, doesn't hold back—the bags go flying like popcorn, the old woman screeches "Easy, easy!", people turn and gawk. Watch out, Germany, Bulgaria is here! At last—the last suitcase hits the

platform, Boyan lines up the luggage trolleys like a pro, snap-snap—everything stacked neatly, the job done, display-ready. Unlike his brother, whatever Boyan touches, he does it with style. That can't be denied.

"Don't mention it, ma'am. We're people—we help each other."

Look at him—even gallant. Suits him, really. Ah, here come the greeters—now it's smooth sailing. The old woman pulls out a box of sweets.

"Here, boys, take some—bless you, I don't know how I would've managed without you."

"No need, ma'am."

"Come on, take one—they're good. Not Bulgarian..." The old woman abruptly stops, glances around sheepishly, then rushes to the arriving family.

"Well, at least my grandchildren will have one. Granny's darlings, sweets for you."

She shoves the box under the kids' noses, but doesn't dare hug or kiss them—who knows what's acceptable in Germany. The little ones don't seem to understand Bulgarian; they look first to their German mum, she nods, "Go ahead," and they each take a candy. And here comes the father—he's definitely one of ours, you can tell immediately. The old lady starts crying.

"My boy, my darling—I lived to see you again. Oh, you've lost weight! What do they feed you here?" She hurries to offer the rescue box of sweets, but her son nudges her aside impatiently.

"Mum, not now. We'll talk later. Let's get to the car—I parked in a no-parking zone."

He clumsily shoves his mother away, who keeps trying to kiss him. He clearly feels awkward—whether from the parking or just because he's a grump is anyone's guess. The family hurries off, the son in front, the kids and their mum trailing behind. The old lady hobbles after them, glancing worriedly at the bags—did she forget something? Oh, the rush! Can't we exchange even a word? Damn this foreign land—everything's upside down.

The platform is empty again. Where did everyone go, did a bomb drop? Vladko immediately sticks to the kiosk window—yep, they've got magazines

with naked girls here too. Okay, okay, we know—it's the same everywhere, just a bit more "different" in some places…

Teodora has stopped at the flower stand. Just look—what beauty, what taste! And the fruits, the vegetables! Everything is there—even milk from chickens, if you wanted. And arranged so perfectly, by colour and shape—like a museum, you're afraid to touch. Boyan silently calculates: a kilo of bananas—one mark. So every German could buy two or three tons of bananas with a single month's pay. Good grief. Go ahead, try not to be jealous. And we call ourselves a banana republic. Bananas, brother? At this rate we won't even qualify as a potato republic.

And yet… the station still looks worn out. Strange. Well, the ones in West Berlin must look different. These folks here are cut from the same cloth as us—they were sunbathing under the same socialist sun until yesterday. Ugly gray cornices, crooked pavement stones, a building faded like a photo in an old family album… Seems even the Germans haven't invented a magic wand yet. They'll need a few years too before they can shake off the past like a dog ridding itself of fleas. *Deutschland, Deutschland über alles…* Who else but them? Sitting in front of their TVs, sipping beer, watching football. And the world watches them in awe, scratching its head: Wow. Those Germans…

He shakes his head. No point in thoughts like that. Time to get to work.

"Come on, no time to waste. This isn't Bulgaria—here, time is money. Here's the address—let's check the map and see the best way to get there."

One-two-three—before they've even had a proper look around, he's already got it figured out.

"U-Bahn Line 4, five stops to go."

"Wow, you act like you grew up in Berlin! How did you manage to get your bearings so fast?" Vladko scratches his head, a bit enviously.

"We're not exactly fresh off the turnip truck either. Come on, let's go."

"What about tickets?" Theodora remembers.

"Wait, let's ask at the kiosk… Aha, I see… Whoa! Now *those* are prices! For that money, you could tour all of Sofia by taxi! Well, what can you do—foreign village, even the roof tiles hit harder. And don't even think about riding without a ticket! It says here the fine is sixty marks!"

Theodora and Vladko exchange a sheepish glance.

"Oh, come on, we're not kids. We *always* buy tickets in Sofia," says Vladko.

"Yeah, right—tell that to my hat. As if I don't remember how you used to stand by the door back in your student days, ready to jump out."

"Well, being a student is different. Students everywhere are outlaws—that's who shakes the foundations of society, right, Dory?"

"While you two were chatting, the train left," notes Theodora dryly.

"It's not called a train, it's the *U-Bahn*. It means 'underground railway'," Bojan explains.

"Thanks for the info. I'll make a note of it."

"And the other one is the *S-Bahn*—that means 'surface rail'."

"Not surface. *Urban*," she replies with a smirk. "I read the guidebook too, you know. We're not completely clueless."

Vladko decides it's time to intervene.

"Alright, enough bickering, or we'll miss the next train too. Don't we want to actually *see* some of Berlin before we run off on business?" (God, if it weren't for me, these two would forget their own heads.)

The train arrives—an old, battered thing. The benches are wooden, and above the door there's a metal plate that reads: "Built in 1932."

"Good grief," marvels Theodora. "Did this come straight from a museum?"

Bojan takes it personally. Any criticism of Germany feels like a jab at him.

"Show me a Bulgarian train from 1932 that's still running, and *then* we'll talk. Here, they build things to last. Once they make it, even bombs can't take it down."

"Thanks, I'll stick with the Ikarus buses."

"Fine, just don't forget your gas mask."

"Oh, I've had enough of you two." Vladko tries to look annoyed, but it's not easy. "One on this side, one on the other—and I'm stuck in the middle like a bare butt in the market square!" (*Hmm, that's a good line, I should write that down.*)

"Alright, sorry," Theodora replies, though her gaze is lost in the tunnel darkness.

"Keep an eye out so we don't miss our stop."

"No worries, I'm watching—we've got two more," Bojan chimes in.

The U-Bahn clatters along, they sit quietly, glancing around. Vladko observes. Quiet people. Cold. Not that folks back home go hugging each other on the bus, but the way people look here—it's different. Still, they're polite—their jaws might snap from all the *Bitte schöns*.

Was it like this in the camps back in the day too? What a nasty thought, but I can't help myself. We didn't have their camps, so we're such saints, are we?

Wait—what's going on?

Something is off a few seats ahead. People are still sitting, but tension fills the air. You can *feel* everyone tightening up. What's happening? Is no one going to say anything?

Aha... A young man, quite ordinary, leather jacket and jeans, is smiling and talking to another passenger. Vladko can't see the other one—someone's blocking the view. He stands up, cranes his neck. There's a young Black man sitting on the bench... but why is everyone looking away? What's going on?

"Bro, what's that guy saying?"

"Mind your own business—it's not our concern."

"Hey now, don't get uppity, I just asked."

"And I just answered."

"I don't like this. Tell me what the German guy's saying."

"Are you new here or what? Can't you see how everyone's acting like they stepped on a frog?"

"But..."

"No 'but'. Mind your own damn business."

"Hold on, we're foreigners too. Are they going to treat *us* the same way...?"

"Keep staring and we might find out."

Vladko shrinks back, and unwillingly starts staring away too—but something gnaws at him, won't let him be. Meanwhile, the German man

seems to be getting agitated—he's gesturing now, almost threatening. The African man sits quietly, looking out the window. Silence all around.

And then, a childhood memory hits Vladko: down by the poplars, near the river, the boys have cornered a stray dog and looped a wire noose around its neck. It thrashes, claws, bites—no escape. "Haul him up—watch him shit himself—hang a tin plate around his neck so it rattles! Whoa! Woo-hoo!"

There! See? He crapped himself—told you he would!

Vladko's running home in tears.

"Mama! Mama!"

"Crybaby! Crybaby! Vladko-duck! Vladko-duck!"

His hands suddenly grow clammy; he feels nauseous.

"What, are we just going to sit here and watch?"

"Keep your arse on the seat and don't piss me off. You want to go picking fights? If the Germans aren't stepping in, neither are we."

At that moment, an old woman rises from her seat, walks up to the young German, and starts speaking to him. Vladko only catches the word *"Polizei, Polizei."* The boy cranes his neck and glares at her with a wolfish sneer but says nothing. The other passengers keep looking away. The African man, encouraged by the support, stands up and looks ready to fight. The German boy smirks crookedly, reaches into his pocket; the African backs off a step and glances around for help...

Phew—next stop. The African gets off, the German stays. Thank God, the continents didn't collide... Damn, I'm drenched in sweat.

"Hey, this is our stop!" shouts Bojan. "What a bunch of gawkers we are. Quick!"

They barely squeeze through the door in time, almost getting stuck. Vladko scans the crowd for the African man, but he's already disappeared. They stand there awkwardly, neither of them daring to look at Theodora.

"Did he really want to..."

The sick feeling in Vladko's gut and throat hasn't passed. He looks around for a rubbish bin, just in case.

“I don’t know what he wanted, but whatever he had in his pocket wasn’t a screwdriver,” Bojan mutters darkly. “Come on, that’s enough. Nothing happened, let’s move.”

Vladko huddles into his jacket, glancing around anxiously. The city that just minutes ago seemed full of light and air suddenly feels dark and threatening.

“How silent everyone was…”

“What can you do—that’s how we were taught,” Bojan remarks philosophically.

“Well then, let’s take our education and shove our heads right up our own arses.”

“Oh, come off it. What’s the big deal? Gonna weep and sniffle over a single negro?”

“You *don’t* say ‘negro,’” snaps Theodora. “In America, they’re called African-Americans now.”

“They can call them Afro-Martians for all I care. Oil and vinegar don’t mix.”

“I didn’t know you were a racist.”

“I’m not a racist, I’m a realist. Unlike you.”

“Great, now you’re fighting again—and what am I supposed to do, stuck between you like…” Vladko searches for another colourful comparison.

“Like what?” Bojan eyes him from under his brow.

“Like nothing.”

“Like a bare arse in the market square, right?”

“Well, it’s not a bad simile. I might even write it down.”

“Your simile’s as flat as a cowpat on a hill. Write *that* down if you want.”

“Bojan, leave him alone, will you!” Theodora’s breathing is uneven, her eyelashes flickering rapidly. Vladko tries to put an arm around her, but she silently brushes him off. Bojan lights another cigarette…

A perfect still life.

“So, are we just going to stand here staring at each other?” Vladko shifts from foot to foot. “We’re tired from the trip, that’s all. We just need a bit

of rest. How about a hot shower? And then a beer in the shade? Come on, brother, lead the way—you're the tour guide here."

They set off in silence. The June day bathes them in generous light; the air smells of blossoming linden trees. Vladko soon forgets the quarrel.

"Look how many cars—and still, the air's so clean."

"Because they have catalytic converters, that's why," Bojan replies curtly. He still hasn't cooled down.

"Oh come on—Trabant with a catalytic converter?"

"How many Trabants have you seen so far?"

"Fair point—they're disappearing. Not even any Wartburgs."

"Of course not. You think they're mad? If *you* had the choice, would you buy a Trabant?"

"Ah, there's one!" Theodora exclaims, like a shipwreck survivor spotting land. "Look how they've painted it—it looks like a zebra!"

"Kid stuff," Bojan remarks dismissively. "No serious person drives a Trabant."

Still, the tension begins to lift. They start counting the passing Trabants, gradually getting caught up in it and delighting in each one like children. There's another!

"Did you see it? A station wagon, just like Dad's!" Vladko babbles excitedly. "Same colour, even! Hey—we shouldn't forget to call home. Mum's probably worried sick."

"There, another one up ahead," adds Theodora. "See? People live here too—it's not like we landed on Mars."

They look around with bright eyes. From the butt of jokes and sneering remarks, the Trabant suddenly transforms into something familiar, almost life-saving. Doesn't matter that it looks like a soap dish, or that it's on the verge of extinction. What matters is that it exists—that it's still kicking. Look at it chug along proudly beside those glossy limousines. So what if they're driving BMWs—doesn't mean they've got three eyes. Let them cough a bit, see how we've been living.

The discovery cheers them up. They start looking for more familiar sights.

“Look, their apartment blocks are just as beaten up as ours. Even the panel blocks are the same.”

“They’re the same all over the world,” says Bojan authoritatively—after all, he went to a construction tech school.

“You talk like you’ve travelled the world,” teases Theodora, but quickly adds in a conciliatory tone, “Do they even have panel blocks in West Berlin?”

“Don’t know—soon we’ll find out.”

“Look—even the cobblestones are the same, only not yellow,” notes Vladko, just to say something, because he feels responsible for keeping the peace. “And all the roadworks, just like back home. Does Mitko live in a panel block?”

“We’ll see in a second. Not far now.”