

The Replica City

by Al Bray

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In Warsaw's central station, the trains arrive below ground, pulling into narrow slots and letting loose streams of passengers who make their way to stairs leading up to the main hall. Edwin had come here once a month for the past five years. The route was familiar; the whole journey had become like fitting a key in a lock and coming home. And seeing the couple was the twist of the key.

They'd first appeared several months after he'd begun arriving on the overnight train from Prague. At first he only caught glimpses of them; a crowd of travelers would pass, and, against the bare surface of the platform, the outline of two figures remained, like shadows without much substance. Then they began to fill in with detail and color. It was as if the more Edwin scribed the same journey, the clearer the couple became, easier to see and remember.

The man was in his late thirties, the woman several years younger—much younger than Edwin. She always wore suits in dark hued layers of black and gray, tailored and belted to fit snugly like a uniform. Heels and hats—fedoras which shaded her pale face. Her companion—also well dressed—usually kept his head down, studying timetables or print newspapers. She was the curious one, the one who searched all the cars as the train pulled into the station. But her gaze never seemed to stick on Edwin; it passed through him as if he wasn't there.

Today, they were in the usual place, standing to the side of a kiosk plastered with colored posters and official notices in black and white. He squeezed his eyes shut and counted to ten. When he opened them, the man was glancing down at a timetable, frowning, and the woman looked up into the windows of the car where Edwin

had been. She checked in her bag as if she'd misplaced something, hesitating for a moment before looking up again. Beams of light shone from above, showing her pale cheeks wet and shining, as if rain were falling improbably through layers of concrete and steel.

The man seemed impatient; he shook his head, and the woman took a last look in the train car and followed the man as he walked away. From somewhere beneath the train, steam rose, which was—of course—puzzling as the train was powered by electricity. The steam condensed on the windows of the cars, making tears streak across the surface. Perhaps that was why the woman's cheeks were shining, Edwin thought, wishing he could comfort her. He shifted the weight of his suitcase in his hand and set off behind them.

In the main hall, the couple stopped before the giant arrival/departure sign which no longer clattered mechanically but was electronic—digital, in fact, and silent. All of Poland's major cities were displayed there—Cracow, Lublin, Lodz. Some—Gdansk, Wroclaw—used to be called by other names, and had been changed in an attempt to mask their history. Others weren't there at all; Oswiecim, Brzezinka, and of course, Treblinka—those place-names were shrouded by an enormous length of death which trailed like a wake across a sea of ashes.

Edwin knew the couple's habits very well; as usual, they spent some time gazing up at the sign. He'd given up trying to gauge which train they were looking for, or whether they were continuing their journey—or had ended it and were meeting some other traveler. The woman looked over her shoulder in his direction, and Edwin stepped back and hid his head, suddenly afraid that, after all those other times she'd looked through him, tonight her gaze might singe—not wound—but burn and mark him for eternity. He turned away, leaving by the exits at the side of the huge building and heading for the Old Town.

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At the Castle Square, it was too early for the restaurants to begin to fill, and too late for the musicians and jugglers to attract crowds

of tourists. He anticipated checking into his hotel, and showering before dinner.

He'd taken this job—advising Eastern European hotels on how to attract American guests—late in life after retiring from the diplomatic service. He was the father of grown children who only needed him in the periphery, and the widower of a beloved wife whose death had surprised them both. Money wasn't an issue; he worked because he liked the travel and being useful.

At a small restaurant in the Old Town, the owner seated him immediately at a table with a view of the street. For ceremony, and out of politeness, Edwin accepted a crystal glass of vodka, served with a bowl of pickled cucumbers which left his mouth full of a mildly metallic flavor.

As he finished his coffee, a couple were seated next to him—Americans—he could tell right away by their clothing and the way they stared openly all around and kept smiling. To make room for the woman, he pulled his table to one side, nodding his head in acknowledgement of the man.

After a few minutes of studying the menu and whispering, the woman caught Edwin's eye. "Excuse me," she said in English. "We're not from here, and—"

"Of course, may I be of help?"

"Could you? My husband didn't want me to bother you, but I just knew you spoke English. The hotel recommended this place, and we don't understand the menu."

"If you like, I could suggest some things."

Edwin signaled for the waiter. After determining that the couple was hungry, he ordered roast duck with baked apples and potatoes, along with a reasonably priced bottle of wine. The couple asked that he stay and join them, and he agreed, angling his chair towards their table, and nursing a second cup of coffee while they ate. They were young, recently married, and on a tour of Europe.

"Everyone asked us: why go to Warsaw?" the husband said. "We came from Prague on the train."

"Ah, the overnight train, I usually ride it myself. I like to sit up all night in the compartment," Edwin said. "You'll want to see Kracow too."

"And you *are* American?" the wife asked. "You sound either American or British."

"I grew up in Chicago. Now I live in Virginia." Edwin thought for a moment, smiling into his nearly empty cup. Something about the young man and woman made him want to say more—something he'd lost the habit of doing. "As a matter of fact," he began. "I was born here, in Warsaw. My parents—well, it was during the war, I was sent to England and then to America where I grew up."

"And your parents?"

"Disappeared—I never saw them again. My father was involved with the Polish government, the Resistance. I suppose it's safe to assume the Nazis killed them both."

The young couple looked at each other open-mouthed. "That's horrible," the wife said. "We've heard stories, and of course we saw Schindler's List."

Edwin nodded. "I was too young to be able to remember that time."

But he had a large collection of black and white postcards from the period, and often walked around the city, comparing certain neighborhoods with the way they'd appeared seventy years ago. Everything was new; the older parts were a careful replica. Other districts were not the same—the station, for instance; the city had grown and expanded. The people—well, of course most of them were new—they weren't replicas. Even the old people, the survivors, were not the same as they had been; they'd stiffened and wrinkled, their memories had loosened. Edwin was like that—in most ways.

"Won't you let us buy you something—a brandy? Yes?" The husband waved the waiter over and Edwin ordered. "Have you ever tried to find out what happened to them?" the husband asked, once the brandy was served. "It must be hard not to know."

"Yes. I've tried rather hard, searching archives, police records—without much success. All I ever found was the testimony

of a man who knew my father. He claimed to have seen him, and my mother at the Umschlagplatz—that was the railroad terminus where Jews from the Ghetto were taken to Treblinka—the place where they were killed.”

That was the image he had of them, an image like one of his old photographs, but internal and persistent. The two of them, carrying battered suitcases which they wouldn't need, his father weak and hollow-cheeked from hunger, his mother a slim, defiant wraith.

“Were your parents Jewish?”

“My mother.”

The wife pushed back from the table. “How can you come here—to Warsaw? I could never—oh, I'm sorry.”

“No, that's quite all right. I never returned here till six years ago, when I was already sixty-five. Never once in all those years. But it's become somehow comforting, I think of them often, being here. More, it seems, the older I get. Yes, another brandy, please. It's hard to explain.”

They talked more about Warsaw, how it had changed. Edwin told them some of the old stories he'd heard from others, about the city before the war. He avoided the subject of his parents; what could he say—that they haunted the train station?

“It's true, when they re-built the city in the Fifties, they relied on a series of 18th-century paintings by an artist named Bellotto. He'd painted Warsaw in extraordinary detail, and the architects were able to rely on his vision for every brick. Have you seen the Old City, the Castle?—all copied from his work. The funny thing is that some of the paintings weren't done from real life; they were of an imaginary Warsaw, a Warsaw which might have been built.”

“Why?” the man said. “Why was it so important to re-create the past?”

“When something precious is taken from you, you want it back, one way or another.”

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Later that night, Edwin went for a walk. The brandy had made his head and feet heavy. A pleasant encounter, he thought, remembering

the American couple's concern and kindness; perhaps he'd see them again before he left.

On the stones ahead of him, high heels tapped, and there was a cough—a man and a woman were walking ahead of him. Something new, he'd never seen them outside of the station before. They were without their suitcases; they both wore fedoras and belted trench coats, and the man exhaled a plume of smoke and threw a cigarette quickly away to the side. Edwin followed at a discreet distance.

The three of them turned right down the Royal Way, and some combination of the surfaces of the buildings and the earth made their voices audible. The man spoke in fluent Polish. *Let's go this way*, he said.

The couple turned off down a side street, walking back in the direction of the train station. Once the woman looked over her shoulder, and spoke to the man. *Someone's there*. The man stopped and turned around, his eyes moving all around the place where Edwin stood very still. The man's hands went into the pockets of his coat; he raised his head as if he were sniffing the air. The woman also looked.

Edwin continued forward towards them. He kept his head down and walked around the couple, at the last minute looking up to meet the woman's gaze. Her head turned as if she'd recognized someone, but she was like a blind person who hears someone walking by but only has a memory of their appearance.

Edwin knew where they were going. In his mind, his most prized postcard appeared—he would lead them, show the way which all three of them knew very well. They passed through the park; the enormous spire of the Palace of Culture and Science loomed ahead, along with the new hotels. At the station, they went underground to cross beneath the street, passing a pair of policeman in soft caps and military fatigues who swung truncheons around their wrists and looked at Edwin with raised eyebrows.

The three of them walked past the huge Marriott as if it wasn't there. The man and the woman were nearly abreast of Edwin; he imagined himself pushing ahead under their watchful attention.

At the end of the block, he turned left. Midway down there was a four-story townhouse made of yellow brick. He walked past it, stopped and turned, waiting for the couple.

The woman had taken the man's arm; their pace slowed as they neared the townhouse. They glanced all around the street, as if they were caught by a sensation of already having been there, already having seen the house across the street, the plantings of tulips in the center of the street where the streetcars used to run. They stopped in front of the house and looked up.

It's just as it was, the woman said. *His room—it was right up there.*

Edwin wanted so badly to be able to touch them, to let them know he'd survived, that they no longer had to haunt the station, waiting for a train to arrive. They must, he thought, feel so out of place in this future they weren't a part of, this city of finely wrought replicas.

For a moment, the three of them looked up at the house, and when Edwin looked down, he was alone.

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Three days later, his work done, he checked out of his hotel and took a final stroll around the Castle Square. He wasn't sure when he'd be back—if at all; yesterday, he'd e-mailed his resignation, promising to explain in more detail when he returned to New York. He would retire again—this time for good, living in America, closer to his children. He boarded the train and found his compartment. Two young women were already in it, and he waited outside while they tried to stuff big backpacks into the overhead compartment.

The platform was empty—of course, he didn't expect to see the couple again; they never appeared when he departed. But then, as the train began moving, he saw the sudden, mysterious gout of steam, the droplets of water streaming down the window, and there they were, standing side by side. The man had his hands in his pockets, and he met Edwin's gaze with a nod. The woman waved a handkerchief, her face made half-full of grief, half of joy.

