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History, or the Four Pictures of Vludka

Gordon Lish

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History, or the Four Pictures of Vludka

He said that he had been considering the convention of the Polish girl, and I said, "In literature—you mean in literature," and he said, "Yes, of course," how else would he mean? touching eyeglasses, beard, lip while noting that he was feeling himself compelled to take up the pose of the poet in eucharistic recollection of etc., etc., etc.—as literary necessity, that is.

He said, "So can you help, do you think?"

I said, "From memory, you mean."

"That's it," he said. "Any Polish girl you ever had a thing with."

I can tell you what the trouble with me was—no beard anywhere on me, no eyeglasses either, meat of real consequence to neither of my lips—nothing, at least, to speak of, nothing to give me a good grab of anything, nothing on my face for anyone to hang on to, nothing to offer even me a good grip.

He said, "Whatever comes to mind, I think."

Here was the thing with me—I did not know what to do with my hands.

"Whatever pops into your head," he said, off and at it again, fingering eyeglasses, beard, lip.

The oaf was all feelies, I tell you—the moron was ledges from top to bottom.

"So," he said, "anything you might want to conjure up for me, then? I mean, just the barest sketching, of course, no need for names, as it were, and addresses."

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But I had never had one. I mean, I hadn't had a Polish girl. What I had had back before that inquiry came to me was a great wanting to pass myself off as a fellow who had had whatever could be gotten.

"Vludka," I said, "her name was Vludka."

"Perfect," he said. He said, "Name's Vludka, you say."

"Yes," I said, "and very, for that matter, like it, too."

"I see her," he said. "Stolid Vludka."

"In the extreme," I said. "In manner and in body."

"Yes, the nakedness," he said. "A certain massiveness, I imagine—wide at the waist, for instance, the effect of flesh built up in slabs."

I said, "Vludka's, yes. And hard it was, too. Oh, she was tougher and rougher than I was, of course—morally and physically the bigger, better party."

"But smallish here," he said, showing.

I said, "Even said she was sorry about it for the way they were before she took her clothes off, and then when she had them off, saw that she should have been warning me about how big everything else was."

He said, "Could tell you'd be lost inside her, awash in stolid Vludka, mouse proposing monkey business to elephant."

I said, "There I was, a punk in spirit, a puniness in fiber."

He said, "It was impossible."

"I said to her, 'Vludka, this is impossible.' "

He said, "She was too Polish for you, much too Polish."

"So I said to her, 'Do something, Vludka. Manage this for us.' "

He said, "She was pliant, compliant—Polish. You said to her, 'You handle it, Vludka, and I'll watch,' and she did," he said, "didn't she?"

"Because she was pliant," I said. "Compliant," I said. "Polish," I said.

He said, "It took her eleven minutes."

I said, "I sort of knew it would."

He said, "That's how stolid she was."

I said, "It was endless. My arm was exhausted for her. I timed her on my watch. Even for a Polish girl, it was incredible. I tell you, she used a blunt fingertip, a thumb even."

"It was thunderous," he said. "Ponderous," he said. "You thinly watching, you meagerly urging. 'For pity's sake, come, Vludka, come,' " he said.

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What I didn't tell him is that what I was really watching were the four pictures on Vludka's bedroom wall instead.

These are what they were of—of Vludka at the railing of a big wooden-looking boat, of a runabout with the door open and Vludka sitting in it with her hands up on the wheel, of Vludka and her father on a blanket in a forest, of a road sign that when Vludka finished doing it to herself she said, "Majdanek, you know what's there?"

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He said, "Well?"

I said, "Well what?"

He said, "What you were thinking—the road sign—Majdanek—what was it that was there?"

I said, "You read my mind."

He said, "No, just books about the camps."

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All my life I have never known what to do with my hands.