

DIANE BRACUK
PREY

FROM THE MOMENT SHE ARRIVED at the train station, Sandra knew that she should have taken the plane to Riga. The sudden stop, the surly porter, then, as she stepped down on the platform, the familiar projectile of pain in her left thigh. Ahead were the cliff-like, Soviet-era steps she would have to navigate with her throbbing leg and roll-on luggage. Planting her right foot firmly on the first step she began her graceless choreography—one step, luggage up, leg up, breath caught to absorb the fresh jabs—then finally she was on the sidewalk, awash in harsh sunlight.

In Sopot, the jewel of the Baltic, where she had spent the last three days, there had been cabs everywhere. Only one car was on this street, a beat-up Volkswagen with a round-faced, blond man slumped at the wheel.

She rapped at the window. “Taxi? Taxi?”

He opened his eyes, a bloodshot and startled blue that reminded her of Curly in *The Three Stooges*.

“Hotel,” she said, pointing to the picture in the brochure she was clutching. “*Hotel*. Do you know where it is?”

He scampered out to get her luggage. “Jah, jah.”

She had barely squeezed herself into the back seat when he was off, hurtling toward a stretch of grey apartment blocks. Graffiti amplified their ugliness, what looked like Polish swear words: huge, prickly thickets of letters whooshing by until the cab lurched to a stop in front of a building emblazoned with a simple “FUC U.”

“Hotel,” he said, pointing to the town square.

“Which one is it?”

He jabbed his finger into space. “*Here!*”

At least the buildings looked similar to the ones in the brochure that she had used to make her reservation with Lucasz, the young concierge at her Sopot hotel who had been so pleased to practise his English. Afterward, he had shyly given her a form that asked her to rate the hotel’s customer service.

She spotted a café sign. “OK, I’ll find it then. No, thank you very much. I can take my own luggage. No, that’s OK. I’m *fine*.”

She was in an empty square of narrow, closely packed houses. Hundreds of similar towns had been built along the coastline during the days when this part of the country, with its sought-after amber, was part of the prosperous Hanseatic Trading League. Already she could see that it wouldn't be what she was used to in Sopot, but that was the point of the train trip, wasn't it? Seeing the *real* Poland, where her grandmother came from, versus bubble tourism. In Sopot she had enjoyed a creamed herring dish—wonderfully delicate, nothing like her Uncle Stanislaw's stinky pickled concoctions—and hoped she could get something similar at the café while she got her bearings. Lugging both leg and luggage over the cobblestones, she plopped herself on a chair beside a rusting metal table.

"Arthritis," her doctor had said, but she referred to it more romantically as her *affliction*.

"Just my affliction," she'd say, when friends started pointing out her limp. "Had to give up pole dancing."

The word pain was inadequate to describe the flare-ups. It was as if a sodden log of driftwood were rammed into her hip joint, splintering it into fragments, pulling her off balance. Once she got to her room she'd rest, read and perhaps try her new amber-based cream, which contained fossilized tree resin, touted as a natural healer.

She shoved her luggage under the table. Right now she needed to down her pain meds with a glass of water. Why wasn't anyone coming out to serve her? And where were the other customers? This wasn't like southern countries where people took siestas.

"Looks like customer service has yet to arrive," she decided to text her friend in Riga, slipping her BlackBerry out of her purse. But nothing. Just a smudgy black rectangle staring back at her, even though it had worked perfectly that morning.

A stocky old woman emerged from the café, clumping towards her in a shapeless navy coat and a pair of mannish, lace-up shoes.

"Hotel?" she asked, stone-faced.

Sandra tried not to stare at her hair, an enormous grey bun, almost aggressively unstylish.

"No, thank you. I already have a room," she said politely. "Could I have some water, please?" She made the shape of a bottle with her hands and, in the same improvised sign language, a drinking motion. "Bottled water, please? No gas."

The woman looked confused, then blurted: "Not here."

“*What* not here? No water here?”

She pointed to the café. “*Tat*. Here!”

It had always struck Sandra how harsh and guttural Polish—a language she had grown up with but never learned—could sound when spoken in anger. “People from the dark ages,” Lucazs had shrugged when Sandra commented on the rudeness of service people, who stubbornly refused to answer even the simplest questions. “They want things back the way they were before.”

“Oh, I get it. You want me to go inside.” Standing, Sandra felt a sickening click in her joint, as if her leg might snap off. Instantly she sat down.

“No. *Here!*”

“I heard you, OK? I’ll go inside, to *there*, but I need a bit of help. If you could just help me with my bag—”

The woman nodded and leaned closer to pick up her luggage, looking animated for the first time. Or was it sly? Sandra’s hand went up, stopping the woman.

“No. I’ve changed my mind. I’m not going there. I’m staying *here*.”

When I was filling out the customer service form under Lucazs’ cool green gaze, so much like yours, but not mocking, I wanted to write: “Thanks for not flirting with me to get a good review. Thanks for not playing me like some gullible old cougar, grateful for every crumb of attention.”

“You’re either prey or predator,” you told me on our first date.

We had been talking about Poland, where I was making my second visit, about its history as a damaged, defeated nation, sandwiched between Germany and Russia. I was taken aback, not just by your juvenile political perspective, but by the way you said it, boldly locking eyes with me. In those days, I didn’t have my affliction, so I excused myself to go to the washroom, sassily showing off what was then a still shapely behind. Reapplying my lipstick, I tried to absorb your harrowing life story. Running away from your abusive mother at sixteen, being homeless, living off various women, until you became a father.

“Prey or predator! Well, that’s interesting. Which are you?” I asked when I returned to the table, noticing that you had ordered another round of drinks.

“It all depends.” You grinned ambiguously.

“I don’t think I’m either. Maybe I started out as prey, with low self-esteem. It was the way I was raised by my immigrant parents—‘can’t do this, don’t try that.’—But I was determined to overcome that.”

“I could tell that by your photo. I thought, now that’s one smart woman, someone who knows what she’s doing. I didn’t even know whether I should try to contact you because I knew other guys would be hitting on you.”

I nodded, keeping my expression sphinx-like. In fact, I had been shocked by how few responses I got on my first attempt at online dating, something I thought I would have been prepared for at my age. When I was ready to give up, your face popped up on my profile, eyes tilted like those of a baby fox.

“To go back to your story, the homeless part,” I said.

“Look, I’m not Biff from the country club, like your ex-husband. I couldn’t exactly dip into my trust fund.”

“Well, I’m not exactly tight with my old country club crowd now that I’m divorced. I think they find my new passion for my Polish roots embarrassing. At the last dinner party I was invited to, a good friend said, ‘Oh Sandra, *must* you talk about all those *depressing* Polish books?’”

“Right. Versus the funny ones about the death camps,” you said.

“Or those hysterical ones about the Stalinist era.”

“Those deportations to Siberia? They always crack me up.”

“Look, they’re snobs,” I said. “Always were, always will be. I’m going from my Gatsby stage to my Gatski stage, and they don’t like it.”

We exchanged torrid glances.

“Maybe the wives are jealous of you,” you said.

“Why would they be jealous of me?”

“The rich divorcee, whose still got it.”

How I preened at that, shamefully so in memory, for while I would have been put off by you calling me “hot” or a “babe” at my age, still having “it”—the illusive “it” factor that transcended looks or age—was plausible.

“Let’s get back to your living on the street, then living off women. Playing them.”

You frowned and looked down. “I have a daughter now. It’s not something I’m proud of.”

“Sorry. I’m not trying to make you feel bad. I’m impressed that you went into social work and turned your life around.”

A drink later, I leaned in closer, our faces almost touching.

“So tell me,” I said. “Is this something you put on your resumé? *Confidence* man?”

Which of these was her B&B, she wondered again, squinting across the square. That house directly across from her, the same blood red as the one in the brochure, or its rusty-toned neighbour? Had she not been worried that her leg, now throbbing like an abscessed tooth, would give out on her, she would hobble over and knock on doors until she found it.

On the train she had read another depressing book about Poland, about the decades of unrelenting fear in this area. Nazis shooting the population of entire villages, the Red Army dragging off survivors in the middle of the night and, most recently, martial law.

And now, in the middle of the day, it was as if another massive evacuation had taken place, the tiny black rectangles of windows staring blankly. How strange that she hadn't seen a single soul, not even a car in what should be a bustling town square. Was there a factory nearby where everyone worked? A relic from the dark days, pumping out shoddy goods, situated away from town since mind-numbing inconvenience had also been part of the Communist creed?

If her BlackBerry were working, she'd have phoned Lucasz. "Excellent," she had rated him on the customer service form, adding in the comment section that he had "gone the extra mile for her." Seeing his puzzled expression, she'd explained, "it means going out of your way to serve people."

Paint was also in short supply during Soviet rule, so these houses, now faithfully reproduced in their bright Hanseatic League colours, must have been, until recently, depressingly dingy. Yet there's something off about them, she thought, glancing compulsively at another window. Almost begrudgingly bright, as if the paint had been slapped on to align them with the edicts of capitalism and the tourist trade.

A wizened face flickered at one of the windows, then disappeared.

The first pulse of panic went through her. These homes were not empty after all. People were in them, watching her. Probably from the time she had limped into the square, waving away the café owner, who, an unwelcome suspicion was telling her, could very well be the town thief.

Drawing her dead BlackBerry closer to her chest, she pretended to type out a chirpy message to her friend in Riga. *Hi there! Just sitting around waiting to be mugged! Affliction flared up, so can't walk away, much less run!* Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the woman coming back from the café, followed by a stout, blond man. Curly, her cab driver?

After our first Match.com date, I prepared dozens of polite reasons why we couldn't get together again. But it didn't matter, because you never got back to me. I had almost forgotten about you when an email popped up, asking if I was still having a torrid affair with Brad from the country club and, if not, would I care to join you for a drink.

"So tell me, when you were scoping out a woman for your next meal ticket, who would you pick?"

We were having drinks at a patio downtown, a regular haunt for our infrequent, last-minute get-togethers—which suited me, because I didn't want to be in a closer relationship with you. Just a playmate, not a keeper, I thought, nevertheless getting girlishly excited whenever one of your messages appeared. *Hey Veronica! Want to go out for a soda pop? Archie. Hey Jackie! Want to see my new yacht? Ari.*

You took a sip of your wine and sucked in your cheeks with an air of injured dignity.

"That was a long time ago and my daughter has made me a totally different person. I really don't like to talk about those days."

"Oh, I understand. Just humour me, okay? I'm curious to see what kind of woman a con man would prey on, that's all. Wait! Let's see if I can figure it out!"

This particular bar had been a favourite watering hole of my old advertising crowd in the nineties, and many of its regulars were middle-aged hipsters. I pointed to an attractive woman around my age, wearing a casually chic vest and pants, her brown hair pulled back in a classic ponytail.

"That one?"

"Could you be a little more discreet?"

"I am! Just answer me. Would you have tried to hustle her?"

You studied her with your cool jade eyes, with lashes longer and thicker than anything I could achieve with even two coats of mascara. When you were a boy, you said, your mother made you do your own laundry, and I wondered how any mother could look into those eyes over an ironing board and not melt?

"Nah. She'd be too smart to buy my story."

At the table next to us were three women I'd privately labeled the Paris Hilton wannabes, with their blonde hair, bling and mammoth designer purses.

"What about her?" I asked, indicating the oldest of the bunch, whose lips were pinched by deep, bitter lines.

You shrugged.

Her companion, chubby and buxom in a low-cut tank dress, was fussing with an unhappy-looking toy chihuahua in her purse, lamenting about the time he had peed in her lap.

“Her?”

Looking embarrassed, but resolute, as if it took courage to own up, you paused, then nodded. “Yes. Someone like her.”

A good con, you said hours later, after last call, had to contain a mix of lies and truth, a plausible reason for being temporarily broke and needing a place to stay. But the cardinal rule was to never look too eager to accept money. Even if you’re absolutely broke, you always refused the first offer of a loan, and said you never take money from a woman.

“One more question,” I said.

“Give it up, Buttercup. We’ve talked enough about this.”

“Just one last question! I promise!” I took a deep breath. “When someone took you home to their place after having bought your bullshit story, how did you ... you know?”

“No, I don’t know.” Your voice was almost prim.

“You know, do *it*. I mean, I’m sure the one you ended up with wasn’t always your physical type. I mean, as a man, how did you do it?”

Eyes flaring, voice cold, you answered, “Oh that’s easy, Sandra. When someone buys your story, you feel *contempt*.”

They approached her now, the woman first, Curly following close behind, holding a glass of water. Sandra gazed at her dead BlackBerry as if she were reading a funny message from her friend, then slipped it face down in her lap as Curly set the glass in front of her, spilling it slightly.

“Thank you,” she said.

Hands crammed into her coat pockets, the woman indicated the café with an irritable shrug of her shoulder. “Here!”

“No thank you. I’m good *here*,” Sandra replied evenly. A sharp, familiar smell pierced her nostrils. Moonshine, Uncle Stanislaw’s homemade brew, that reeking staple of family gatherings. From his florid face, she guessed it was emanating from Curly.

The woman shifted from foot to foot, looking flummoxed as to what to do next, trying to size up this strange Western woman who had not budged from her chair. Curiosity softened her features, and Sandra saw that she wasn’t as old as she had thought. Probably closer to her own age, which she

referred to as “fifty, and then it gets fuzzy,” but she couldn’t imagine this woman having long, shiny hair or wearing even a smidgen of lipstick. It was if she had emerged from the womb like this, with her grey bun and clumpy shoes, the perfect party comrade.

Half needing to convince herself that she had not imagined the booking she had made, she held up her brochure and pointed to the picture of what she hoped was her B&B.

“See? I’m staying here. Do you know where it is?”

The woman shrugged with a cultivated blank look. Curly, who had slunk behind her as if awaiting instructions, at least had the decency to look guilty, for Sandra had given him a generous tip after her harrowing cab ride. Had he spent it all on booze? What was his relationship with this steamrolling woman? Terminally cowed husband? Partner in clumsy heists perpetrated on anyone dumb enough to end up there?

The surrounding houses seemed to huddle together clannishly, their hollow black windows an accusation. Why did you have to come here and make trouble? Forcing us to look the other way, interrupting a day that had been turning out to be normal? You’re an outsider, and aren’t our problems always caused by people not from here? Bad enough dealing with the Nazis, the Communists and the secret police—now we have spoiled Western yuppies demanding that we go the extra mile?

Another wave of panic hit. Maybe Lucasz was in on it as well. He had given her a beaming smile on the way out, but the smile of a handsome young man could have many meanings. Perhaps he was secretly sympathetic to the “people from the dark ages.” Maybe he had been insulted by some unintentional condescension from her. A country that had endured some of the worst atrocities of the twentieth century, now being put upon to do more for people who were utterly clueless about their suffering. He must have seen her limping when she signed out at the front desk. For all she knew, he could have planned the heist. *Stupid old bitch arriving about two. And easy pickings! A lame duck!*

Looking queasy, Curly leaned closer, hesitated and lunged under the table for her luggage, throwing himself off balance. Sandra braced herself for him to vomit over her in the wild stereotype of a drunken Pole, but the woman yanked him back with a sneering curse.

“Here!” she barked at Sandra again.

“No. I already have a B&B.”

The woman started to curse her with a fusillade of words that Sandra vaguely recognized from booze-soaked Christmases, shrill splutterings over some age-old family feud escalating to a fever pitch.

Just give up your BlackBerry, she thought, her mind racing. It's no big deal, it doesn't work. Maybe they'll see it as a haggle from the black market era.

Another oath split the air, and this time Sandra caught something personal in the tone. Contdescension. Yes, the woman had sensed something when she was sizing her up. The single woman, without a pack. No man to come home to and no hope anymore that there ever will be one. Tears sprang to Sandra's eyes. Looking away, she pushed her luggage further under the table with her feet, which only prompted the woman to shove Curly back towards her. A mistake, for the sharp motion made him gag; clamping his hand over his mouth, he stumbled back to the café.

It was then Sandra saw the woman's hands, the knuckles swollen to the size of walnuts. Arthritis, a shared affliction. But rheumatoid arthritis, far more debilitating, bathing small joints in an inflammatory broth until a hand became a claw incapable of even grasping the handle of a suitcase.

"Fuck you," she said as the claw came toward her, intending to hit her, shove aside the table, she didn't know what. Raising her Blackberry high, she whacked it against the knuckles.

When my affliction rolled in, I was oddly grateful for the pain. At least that constant and excruciating ache kept me from obsessing about what we eventually did *down there*. An edgy lover, you were pushing me past my boundaries, making me drunk with exhilaration at my new daring.

"Hey you. Is there something wrong?" I asked one night, when we were watching a movie at my place.

"No, nothing's wrong."

"You seem distracted."

"No ... well yes, there is something, but I don't want to talk about it."

After much wheedling, I got it out of you. Your beloved twelve-year-old daughter, whom I had met on a few occasions, needed braces, which you couldn't afford. The kids at school were starting to call her "Chiclet Mouth," and she was coming home in tears, which was making you crazy.

"Oh, that's just terrible. How much are the braces?"

"\$5000. And that's just the start, apparently. Now the dentist is telling us that her jaw is too small, and she may need reconstructive surgery."

“Can’t your ex help?”

“Don’t even go there. The bank is cancelling her credit cards.”

The movie was a civil war romance from the thirties, and I watched as a carriage pulled up in front of a plantation.

“Would it help if I loaned you the money?”

You winced as if slighted. “I only told you about this because you asked what was bothering me, not because I was asking for a loan.”

“I know. I know—”

“It’s a bad time for my cash flow right now, but I’ll get the money.”

“What if I loaned you half? That’s \$2500.”

“You can spare that much right now?”

“Yeah, I can. My business is doing well.”

“I suppose that could get her started on a retainer, at least.”

“Look, it’s not a problem at all. I can even write a cheque for you right now.”

I was halfway to my purse hanging in the adjoining hallway when you shouted, “No!”

“No ‘what’?”

You had readjusted your position, perching on the couch’s edge, rubbing the tops of your thighs in quick, frantic motions.

“No, I don’t want your money. I don’t take money from women.”

I froze.

“Isn’t that one of the lines from your con man repertoire?”

“What?”

“You know. Remember you told me the first rule of thumb was to say you never accepted money from a woman?”

Your face changed to that of a chastened child.

“Oh shit!” you cried. But at least you spared me the further insult of a canned apology as I showed you the door.

And now people were emerging from the arched alleyway into the square. Coming home from work, probably from a factory outside town as she had suspected. A man in a crumpled cap. A woman with a jutting prow of a bust clutching a loaf of French bread. No one looking her way, as Curly and the woman approached her, a new aggressiveness in their stride.

She couldn’t believe that she’d hit the woman, had caused her to double over. Seeing his partner lurching back to the café, whimpering and

rubbing her hand, had probably instantly sobered Curly up. Giving up the BlackBerry was out of the question.

You've got to make a move, she thought. But where? Who? Which of the inhabitants of this place—who were now assiduously ignoring her, wanting to get to their hard-earned dinners—would help her?

She chose the woman with the large bust because she reminded her of her grandmother. Grasping the table edge to steady herself, it struck her that she had achieved her wish to see the real Poland. On the run from some invader, a bullet meant for the head blasting the kneecap to a bloody pulp instead. Having to make that split-second decision of where to go for help. Perhaps your last thought ever as you made a mad dash across a cobblestone square, the ultimate leap of faith.

Her leg quivered, then buckled under her, much to the vindicated amusement of the woman, who let out a short barking laugh as Sandra fell back into her chair. A piercing, electronic shriek filled the air.

“Sandra?”

“Lucazs?”

“Yes, it is Lucazs, Sandra. I've been trying to phone you.”

“My BlackBerry wasn't working! It's just come back on now!”

“Where are you, Sandra?”

“I don't know where I am, Lucazs! I have no idea where I am!”

“The lady from the B&B has been phoning me. She's been saying I am seeing this lady, I think she is the right lady, sitting at the table, but I don't know why she won't come.”

Sandra saw a woman waving at her from a lace-curtained window. “Yes! Yes! I see her! Hello! It's me!”

People in the crowd began to stop, shy, curious looks on their faces. The woman spat on the cobblestones and turned away. And then it was Curly's moment, perhaps one he had been waiting to reclaim his trampled manhood, some ancient chivalry in a Polish man's soul. He extended his arm towards Sandra with the slightest of bows. “Come. I will help you,” he said.